THE SILVER SURFER

#64

MARVEL'S MAIN MAN —
STAN LEE
LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

MOEBIUS
MAKES HIS MARK AT MIGHTY MARVEL

HERO COMICS PUBLISHER
DENNIS MALLONEE
AN OUTSPOKEN VIEW OF THE INDUSTRY

DAVID ANTHONY KRAFT'S

COMICS INTERVIEW

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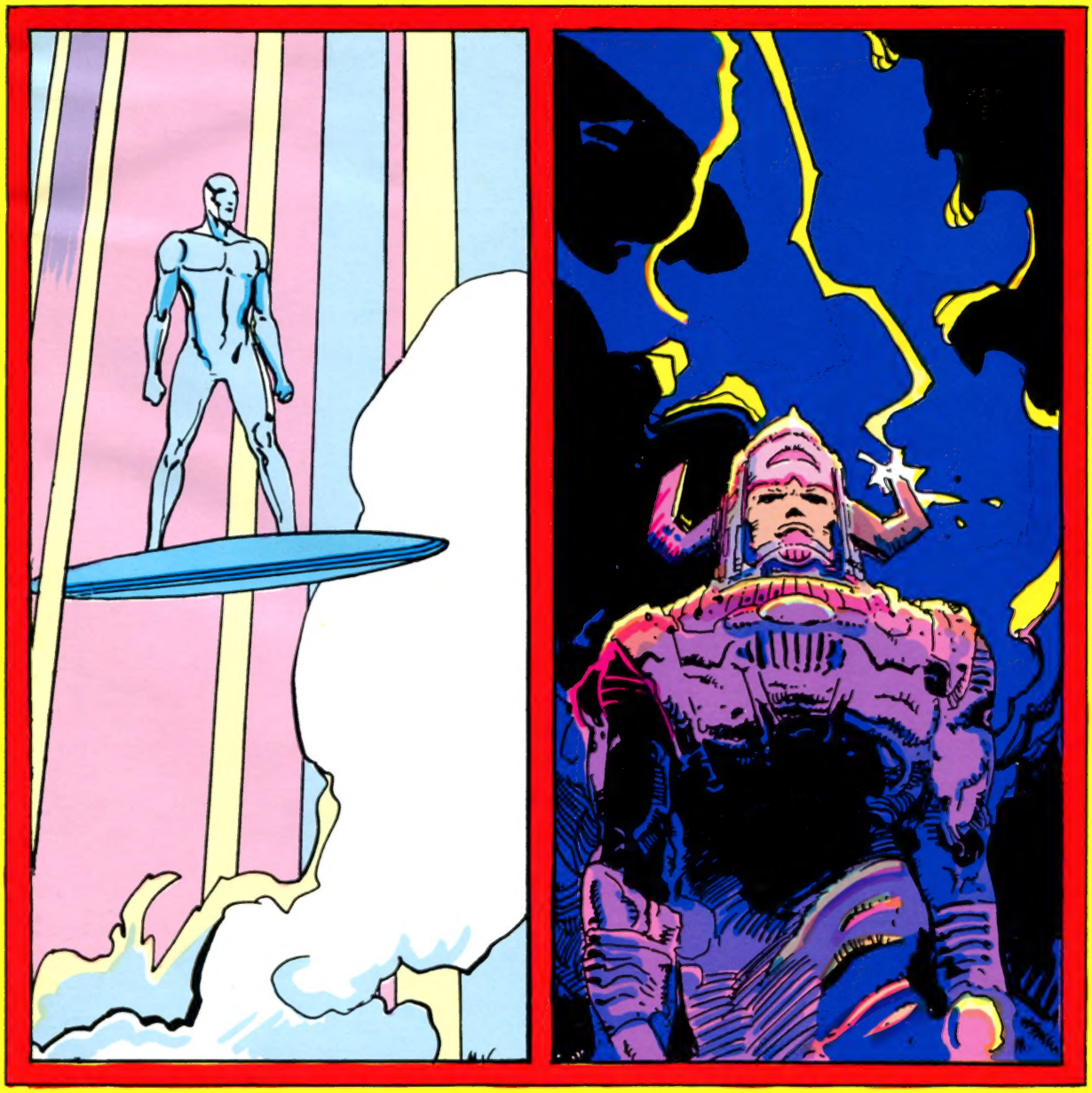

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CREDITS

COMICS INTERVIEW

DAVID ANTHONY KRAFT
editor/publisher

conceived by:
JIM SALICRUP
editorial and design consultant

DARREL BOATZ
associate editor

JEAN-MARC LOFFICIER
LOU MOUGIN
contributing editors

M KAY McGONNELL
operations manager

JUDY O'NEIL
modem maven

D HAMBONE
art & tone director

TAMMY BROWN
CAROL KALISH
PEGGY MAY
ED O'NEAL
special thanks

SILVER SLURPER
sentinel of the snackways

MARTIN W HERZOG
canadian correspondent

J R MATHER
international marketing director

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MOEBIUS
art
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colors

UP FRONT

CROSSOVER CRISIS

During the past few years, the word "crossover" has become increasingly common to comic books. Every third or fourth title from Marvel or DC now seems to carry a banner on the cover stating the fact that this issue is something you might want to pay a little extra attention to, because it is part and parcel with another story in another title which, if you do indeed read that other title, is really something ultra-important, and so forth.

In short, for better or worse, whether planned or accidental, crossover comics (meaning series which tie into as many other series as can be, as potently and dramatically and directly as feasible) are here, possibly for . . . good?

About the only step left to be taken is an actual, reg'lar, unlimited mainstream series of one crossover after another, the perpetual expansionistic story of stories with an unlimited cast, fraught with deaths, origins, name and costume changes, character conflicts, re-evaluations, revisions, more deaths, historical moments (new and used) and fan faves.

It could happen, you know. Wouldn't that be something? Is it what we want? It's definitely where we're heading. Or did you think those banners were proliferating for no reason at all?

Think about it. That's all I ask.

—Darrel L. Boatz
Associate Editor

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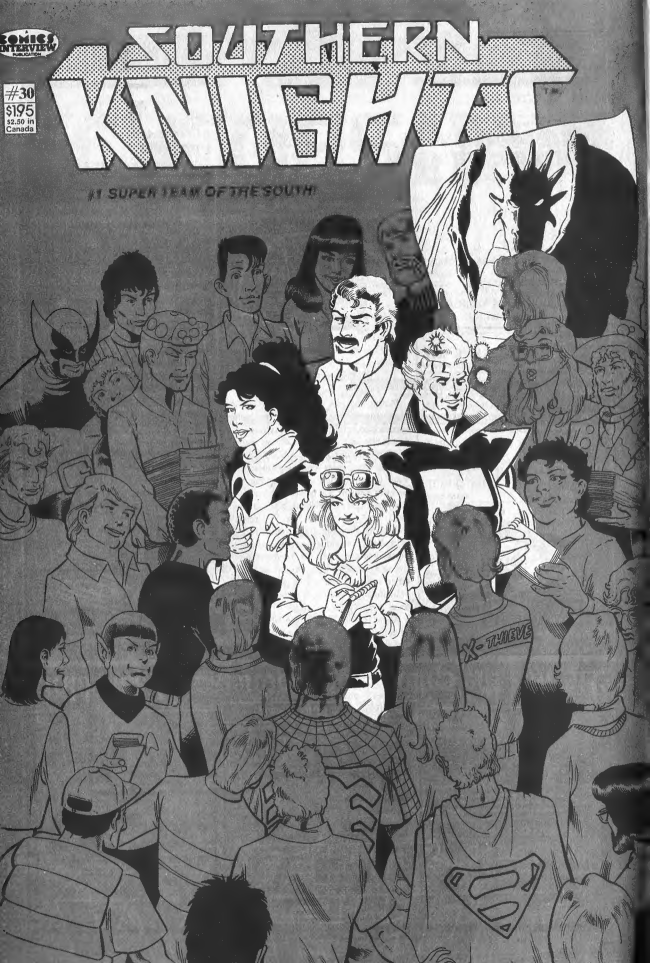
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X-THIEVES

"I'm doing three SILVER SURFER books."

STAN LEE

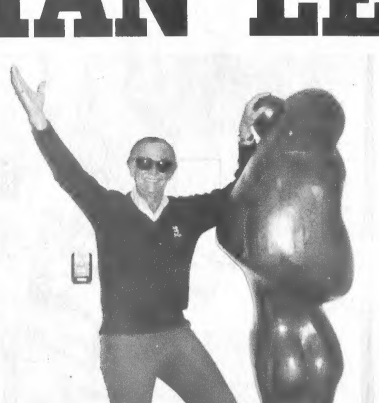


Photo: Darrell L. Boatz

When asked which of his characters is his favorite — and he is often asked — Stan Lee replies that he doesn't really have a favorite, he loves them all. Then he says, because people really want an answer and because he really wants to oblige them, that Spider-Man is his favorite because Spider-Man is the one most like himself — Spider-Man has no luck. That he says with a broad grin and a gleam behind his tinted glasses, and it always gets a laugh.

But there is a truth in that statement. Take, for instance, the time he spoke at Western Illinois University in Macomb. One day he was at his bright and sunny office in California, trying to figure out what to pack for the trip, and I called him to confirm that we were still on for a COMICS INTERVIEW talk, so he asked me what the weather was like here. This was Monday, mind you, and since the previous Wednesday the weather had not varied; the days were warm and sunny and at some point interrupted by a thunderstorm, and the nights got chilly but weren't dropping to freezing — so that's what I told him. The next day he flew into a snowstorm! His plane was late in arriving, the dinner planned in his honor

All art accompanying this interview is © 1970-88 M.E.G., unless otherwise noted.

"John Buscema is doing one illustration per page."

had to be called off, and it looked as if this interview — originally scheduled for after his lecture, but people have to eat some time — would have to be called off! In fact I wouldn't have blamed him if he had decided to have nothing to do with me — warm and sunny indeed — but Stan's really too nice a guy for anything that petty.

We were able to squeeze this interview in just before he was scheduled to speak, which was an intrusion since normally before Stan speaks he likes to take some time to himself and focus his attention and organize his thoughts. In fact he was so nice about the whole thing that I didn't find out I was intruding on his normal routine until afterwards. (By the way, despite the storm and the havoc and everything, Stan gave a marvelous speech before a sizeable crowd, everyone had a lot of fun and went home elated; if ever you have the chance to hear Stan somewhere, do yourself a favor and go.)

So, my thanks go out to Paul Astrouski of Journey Comics, Macomb's local friendly neighborhood comics shop, for putting me in touch with the people I needed to get in touch with at Western; and my thanks go out to the very nice people of the WIUUB, without whom this interview would not have been possible; and my thanks go out to Stan for so many things, for all of the great books and characters, for all of the fun, and mostly for being Stan . . .

THE SILVER SURFER from the hardbound graphic novel by Lee/Buscema — "Judgement Day."

"I've always loved Moebius' stuff."

© 1988 Moebius

DARREL L. BOATZ: *Stan, Dave Kraft sends his best regards.*

STAN LEE: And mine to him.

DARREL: *The first thing I'd like to ask you about — a friend of mine is a big fan and couldn't make it up here to see you, a big fan of yours and also a fan of pro wrestling, so I promised to ask — why is Spider-Man a pro wrestler in the newspaper strip now?*

STAN: *(Chuckles.)* Well, I was just looking for another story line and it seemed like a good one; I had been watching wrestling and I was getting kind of turned on by all the theatrics. He's not going to be a pro wrestler for long, the story ends after awhile, but, you know, you could say that about any plot that you do: Why did you do it? It seemed like a good idea at the time.

DARREL: *I thought maybe this was going to be like a permanent change.*

STAN: Oh, no, it's just one story line and then it finishes.

DARREL: *Well, the main thing Dave wants us to talk about is the SILVER SURFER book you're doing. You're doing this with Moebius?*

STAN: Right. The funny thing is I'm doing *three* SILVER SURFER books. I'm doing one with **Keith Pollard** that he started two years ago, or three years ago, and I understand he's just finishing it now, the artwork. I think the one with **Keith Pollard** might be a graphic novel, I don't remember. And I'm doing one with **John Buscema**, a graphic novel, and **John Buscema** is doing one illustration per page.

DARREL: *Oh, wow!*

STAN: It's like a whole book of title splashes and I'm making a story out of it. And with **Moebius** we're going to do it in regular comic book form and then reprint it in a more expensive edition. In fact **Moebius** just sent me the first three pages to look at and they are *gorgeous!* I think it's going to be something that's going to just cause a lot of talk.

DARREL: *How did you and Moebius get together and decide to do a SILVER SURFER book?*

STAN: I've always loved **Moebius'** stuff, I think it's really great, and so I thought someday I might like to work with him on something. Well, one day he came over to see me and we went out and had lunch together, and he said that he'd always loved *my* stuff and would like to work on something together if we could. I said, "What do you think of the Silver Surfer?" He said, "Oh, that's my favorite character!" And that's all there really was to it.

DARREL: *Basically, what kind of story can we look forward to?*

STAN: It has quite a religious angle, I don't want to say more than that. But it involves religion more than most of the things I've done. I think I did it that way because most people seem to — I don't know about the current SILVER SURFERs, I haven't had time to read them — but years ago when I was doing them most people felt that there was a little bit of a religious undertone to them.

DARREL: *There was always more philosophy involved in the SILVER SURFER stories.*

STAN: Yeah. So I tried to make this sort of a philosophical statement as well, and

Jean Giraud/Moebius as drawn by Jean Giraud/Moebius (mid-70s).

Here, and the next two pages... stills from a 30 second television commercial.

LEE: You know, here at Marvel I've got Spider-man and all these characters and super villians like Dr. Doom to worry about.

I can't waste time worrying about things like shaving.

This guy calls me and he says

TM & © 1977 Personna Double II

"Most people felt there was a bit of a

Character © 1988 M.E.G./Art © 1975 Kirby & Stevens.

Jack "KING" Kirby & Dave "ROCKETEER" Stevens teamed together for this San Diego Comic Convention drawing (circa 1970).

I hope it'll come out as good as I expect it to — or I *expect* it to come out as good as I *hope* it to! *(Laughter.)* Whatever the case may be.

DARREL: *You were quoted somewhere recently —*

STAN: *(To recorder.)* It's a lie, it's a *lie! (Laughter.)*

DARREL: *The quote was that you wished you had never let anyone else work on THE SILVER SURFER.*

STAN: Yeah. Well, I like **Steve Englehart**, I think he's a fine writer, and I like **Marshall Rogers** also. The only thing is is it was the only book that nobody else had ever written except me. I kind of liked that and felt I was really identified with it. After I gave up SPIDER-MAN then someone else did SPIDER-MAN, and someone else did THE FANTASTIC FOUR and DOCTOR STRANGE and THE X-MEN and all of them. I felt that it was kind of nice for me to have been the only writer of THE SILVER SURFER, so I felt a little bit disappointed when somebody else did it. I would have liked to have been the only person. Had I known they were absolutely going to have the book done, I would have *found* the time to do it myself. I didn't really have time but I would have *made* the time, rather than have anybody else do it. But the important thing I want to say is that this is not at all a criticism of Steve or of Marshall, it's just that it's one book that I would have liked to have always done myself. But obviously that is not to be.

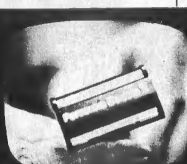
DARREL: *It's interesting, there are a lot of limited series put out now, people seem to be going more in that direction in the creative sense that when the guys on a book get done then that's the end of it. Do you feel that's a good direction for comics to be headed?*

STAN: I think there's a reason for it, I think the writers and artists prefer doing it that way; they like to tackle a project, keep control of it, do it as well as they can, and then go on to something else. I know when I was there it was very difficult to keep people working on the same project too long. *(Laughter.)* I don't see anything really wrong with it; except in an ideal situation, in the most perfect of all possible worlds — which will never be — I would think the *best* way to have a comic book company would be to have one artist and one writer who are the *best* for a strip to do that strip all of the time. Then the strip will always keep the same style and have the same identity, and it would be the ideal strip because the characters would never be out of character and they wouldn't change.

But there's also a negative to that. It's always possible that the artist and the writer might get in a rut after awhile, and there's always the possibility that a new artist and a new writer will give a strip a shot in the arm, so that's good too. The one thing that bothers me a little bit is that very often when a new artist and a new writer take over a strip, they may change it more than I would like to see it changed. Suddenly the characters start looking different because the artist wants to draw it in a different way, and they may start speaking differently because the writer perceives of the character as having a

"try a Personna Double II." And I said "OK, I'll try it."

This Personna is beautifully designed.



Twin blades on each side. It's clean, it's got quality.

religious undertone to SILVER SURFER."

Marvel's "never-published" Lee/Buscema SILVER SURFER comic (1984-85). Not to be confused with the Lee/Buscema graphic novel.

slightly different personality. I wish that writers and artists could take strips over and give them new life and new inventiveness and new creativeness, but still keep the characters looking the way they should and talking the way they should.

DARREL: *Yeah, that can be a little disconcerting at times.*

STAN: Yeah, yeah. By the way, when you write this up you have to do me a favor and every now and then where it's appropriate throw in things like "Stan said laughing" or "He said with a grin" or "He said mockingly" or so on. Sometimes when these things are printed I'll read them and think, "Did I really say that?" because there'll be something that really doesn't sound right, and then I'll realize that when I said it I was making a joke. But, you know, when the cold hard words are there on the page you can't hear the way I said them and it doesn't sound like a joke or it doesn't sound like it was said in fun, so you have to make sure and do that for me.

DARREL: *Okay, no problem. Well, Stan, someone said in COMICS INTERVIEW not long ago that you had a trick you could do where you could define all of your characters with one line.*

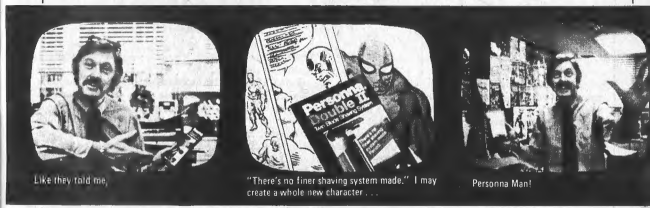
STAN: I don't remember, did I ever say that?

DARREL: *I don't know if you said it, somebody said it about you.*

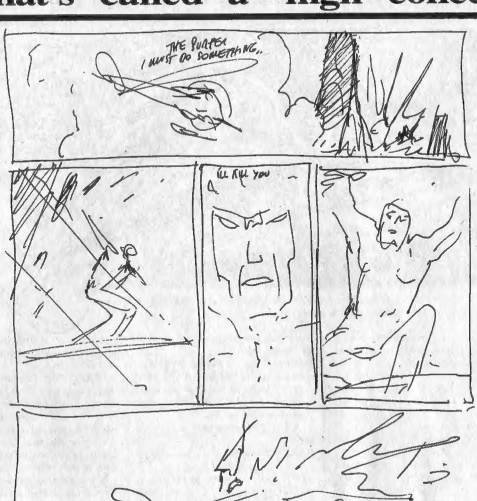
STAN: Well, you know, in Hollywood they say they like movies and television shows that are one-liners, where you could just mention one line and the person *gets* the idea right away, like you can describe ROBOCOP with one line. *(Laughter.)* That's usually called a "high concept" movie. And yeah, sure, I guess I could do that. Daredevil is a blind superhero who in his civilian identity is an attorney. That's a one-liner in a sense. It doesn't really tell you anything except the overall parameters of the strip; it doesn't really give you any depth or feeling for who the characters are.

DARREL: *Well, I was wondering what the one line for the Silver Surfer might be.*

STAN: *(Pause.)* Well, the Silver Surfer in a sense was a tortured soul from another world who was misunderstood. No, I'm not saying that well. He was like the epitome of goodness as I saw him, and the more he tried to help people the more he was misunderstood, and the more . . . That isn't good either. I really would have a tough time coming up with a one-liner for the Silver Surfer. The Silver Surfer I think is a little too complex for a one-liner. If anybody could do a one-liner for the Silver Surfer then I'd love to hear it! *(Laughter.)* You would have to mention that he is an alien, you would have to mention his inherent goodness, his power, and the fact that humans have difficulty relating to him and he sometimes has



"That's called a 'high concept'



Moebius layout page, and...

difficulty understanding humans. That's difficult for a one-liner. I've lectured at colleges where the students have said they thought I was trying to portray somebody who was Christlike, so maybe Christlike would be a one-liner or a one-worder. But it requires more than that, really, to explain the Silver Surfer.

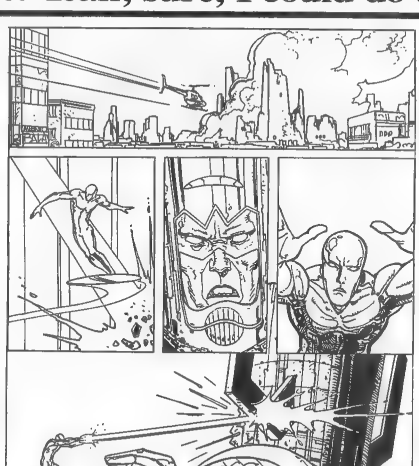
DARREL: *Okay. Well, I also understand that you're doing a book about the history of Marvel, your secretary mentioned something along those lines. Is this going to be a history of the company?*

STAN: Yeah.

DARREL: *That's what I figured since you've already done the ORIGINS OF MARVEL COMICS books.*

STAN: Well, it'll be *both*. It will be a history of the company, but it will be much more in depth than the ORIGINS books. In the ORIGINS books I just did very brief pieces, just a few pages each, on the origins of the main characters. This book is going to discuss all of the artists who worked for us, all of the writers who worked for us, all of the strips we've done — it's going to be a *tremendously* complete book. Right now we're planning to sell it for $50, and it'll be the size of that ART OF WALT DISNEY book, if you've seen

movie. Yeah, sure, I could do that."



. . . the finished work.

that book

DARREL: *Yes, what the libraries call an oversized edition.*

STAN: Yeah, and it'll be published by Simon and Shuster, we're not publishing it. *(Smiles.)* A big coffee table book.

DARREL: *Will this go back all the way to 1939?*

STAN: It will go right back to when the company started, even a few months before the company starts.

DARREL: *Right, wasn't Martin Goodman publishing pulps before he got into comics?*

STAN: Yeah, and we mention that in the book, we discuss all of that.

DARREL: *Well, going back to the '40s, what was Timely like when you first got there?*

STAN: It was a small company, there were just a few people there, and the comics were just part of it; they also had the pulp magazines, some crossword puzzle magazines, a few picture magazines, everything.

DARREL: *And you got there in 1940, I believe.*

STAN: It was '39 or '40.

DARREL: *Then you started to learn the business of comics. What would be your most vivid memory, learning experience, from that era?*

STAN: **Joe Simon** sitting at the drawing board, puffing a big cigar. *(Laughter.)* I don't remember the learning process, I really don't. I was just given the stories and they said, "Here, proofread them and edit them if you can." I did that. And then I was asked to write some stories. I

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"He was the epitome of goodness as I saw him."

seemed to have learned it just by osmosis. There weren't any long teaching sessions or anything like that, we were too busy. Nobody had the time to teach me about anything.

DARREL: *And nowadays there is the Kubert School, there are all kinds of workshops all over the place.*

STAN: I think that's great, I wish they had them in those days, I'd have learned quicker. *(Laughter.)*

DARREL: *Well, World War II came up pretty suddenly there and you left Timely and went into the Service. What did you do in the War?*

STAN: I started out in the Signal Corps repairing wires and stuff like that, telegraph poles, communications, and then I was transferred to the Training Film Division and I wrote training films and I wrote instructional manuals — I became a teacher, so to speak. I would take difficult subjects and rewrite them and do movies of them and put them in very easy to understand terms so that the troops could learn them quickly and easily and accurately. I *loved* doing that, I love education. In fact when the War ended I decided I would try to publish a new type of textbook using illustrations and cartoons. I *almost* got into that, but then I went back to the comics and we got busy again and I never quite got back to it.

DARREL: *When you went back to the comics, how had things changed from before the War?*

STAN: I'll be honest with you, I don't remember. I have a lousy memory for details. There was a fellow named **Vince Faygo** who I had put in charge in my absence — he was a friend of mine, he did animation, and there was a lot of animation in comics in those days. And then I came back and it may have been that by now Westerns had become the more popular strips. I won't know until I start writing that chapter in my book and I look up the records and see what they tell me.

DARREL: *Speaking of your book again, are you collaborating on that with anyone?*

STAN: There's a fellow named **Brad Elliot** who is doing the research for it, a really wonderful guy. He's been travelling all over the country, talking to people, so he's giving me a chronological list of names and dates and when things happened, and I'm taking that and putting them into my own style.

DARREL: *That's a big job. I did some research just over the past few weeks, doing my homework for this interview, about Timely in the '40s and Atlas in the '50s and so on, and I ended up with a five-page list just of people's names. That's a lot of people.*

STAN: Oh, yeah.

DARREL: *Well, moving along, in the*

OF COURSE, THAT DOESN'T SOLVE OUR PROBLEM- WE STILL HAVE TO REGAIN OUR FORMER STABILITY!
BE THANKFUL FOR WHAT WAS ACCOMPLISHED HERE!
BESIDES, WE'VE LEARNED WHO THE "S" PEOPLE ARE.
YOU CAN HARDLY EXPECT THE SKRULLS TO HELP US... THEY'RE SO CRUEL!
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Panel from WHAT IF #11 (1978). Story title: "What If THE FANTACTIC FOUR Were The Original Marvel Bullpen?" (story/art: Jack Kirby).

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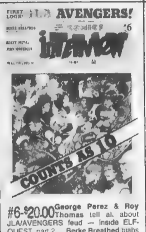

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Stan Lee: (To recorder.) "It's a lie, it's a lie!"

'50s Timely became Atlas, and along the way there were a lot of different names. I've always been curious about that, why all the different company names were used?

STAN: There's a very simple reason and — I'm not much of a finance man — but someone in the office explained it to me, it had to do with taxes. Apparently the publisher saved money in taxes by putting out every magazine, or every few magazines, under a different corporation name. So there were all kinds of names. His name was **Martin Goodman**, one of the companies was called Margood Publications. *(Laughter.)* He had a son named Chip and another one named Iden, and one of the companies was called Chipiden Publications. All *kinds* of names, he had dozens of names, and it had to do, as I said, about saving money in taxes. I don't understand how or why, but that was the explanation I had been given.

DARREL: *It's kind of amusing, with all of the collecting and indexing and cataloguing over the years, people still aren't certain they have everything that Marvel put out in their catalogues and indexes and so on. You wouldn't happen to have some vague memory of some missing Marvel they could all get after?*

STAN: *(Laughs.)* No. Unfortunately I have probably the worst memory in the world. It makes me happy, for this reason: If my memory was just bad now I would figure it's old age and I'm getting senile, but I've *always* had a bad memory. When I went to work for Marvel I had a bad memory. *(Laughter.)* In fact, I don't know if you're familiar, when I was writing THE HULK I called his alter ego Bruce Banner and sometimes I'd write Bob Banner and the readers would say, "Don't you know the name of your own character?" *(Laughter.)* I would forget. In fact the reason I used to give them names that began with the same first letter, like Reed Richards, Peter Parker, Bruce Banner, on and on, I did that a lot because it made it easier for me to remember the names. If I could think of one name then I would know the other name would begin with the same letter, so it was easier for me to think of it.

I have a *terrible* memory for details, all of my life. After I got out of the Army I would meet people that had been in the Army with me and they would say things like, "Gee, I remember in May of '42 when we were stationed at this camp and we did these things and those things!" — I would know I was stationed at a camp, I knew where I had been, but I couldn't tell you if it was May of '42 or March of '44 or whatever. I just don't have a mind for details.

DARREL: *I have some of the same problem. I meet people I knew in college and I can't remember them for anything. I can remember college very well, but I can't remember some of those people no matter how hard I try.*

STAN: I feel sorry for you, I have the same thing and it's a *curse! (Laughter.)* I used to hate to go to parties unless my wife was with me, 'cause I would walk by a guy and she'd say to me, "Stan, say hello to him, he used to be our next-door neighbor." *(Laughter.)* It's terrible. *(Points to notes.)* Go ahead.

DARREL: *Well, through the years comics had a lot of different challenges, there was the Depression at first, and then the War, and then the Cold War, and Marvel was never a big company in any sense until the '60s.*

STAN: Right.

DARREL: *How did Marvel survive all those years? A lot of companies didn't.*

STAN: Well, we survived mainly because we were able to produce things fast and not too expensively, and we were just good enough, the books sold well enough, there were enough kids that wanted to read our stories. I think we did good covers which attracted kids. The stories were

Pencil page from Lee/Byrne SILVER SURFER #1 (1982 one-shot).

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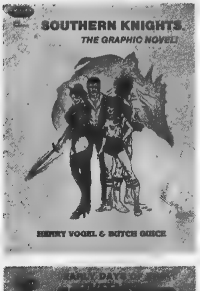

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"We ended up getting a commendation from the PTA."

nothing special but they were alright. But, as I say, we were very professional, we had a lot of experience, and we knew how to do the things quickly and cheaply and they were just good enough. I wish I could say they were better — *(Smiles.)* some of them were better! *(Laughter.)*

DARREL: *Well, of course the big thing that happened in the '50s was Wertham, and eventually the Comics Code. How did you feel personally while all that was going on?*

STAN: Terrible! **Wertham,** I don't know if he was a phony, I don't know if he really believed what he was saying, but he was just so wrong about so many things. One of the points that he had that I remember was that he said that he had been at a reform school and he'd questioned a lot of the kids, and it turned out that 95% of them read comics, so therefore that proved to him that comics were bad because 95% of the kids in reform school read comics. And I remember I was on a platform somewhere, I think we were debating or something, and I remember saying, "My God, 95% of those kids drink milk, eat ice cream, play ball." That's sophistic logic.

DARREL: *Yeah.*

STAN: I mean a psychiatrist can't say that, that isn't even scientific! That's what was so wrong with so *much* of what **Wertham** said. He said things that impressed the public, and it was like shouting fire in a theater, but there was little scientific validity to it. And yet because he had the name doctor people took what he said seriously, and it started a whole crusade against comics.

DARREL: *And comics were really dragged through the mud there.*

STAN: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

DARREL: *And the Code was what eventually resulted. From what I understand there were Congressional hearings, but Congress eventually didn't side with Wertham?*

STAN: No.

DARREL: *And then the Code came about. How did that happen?*

STAN: Well, the publishers themselves decided, "Gee, we don't want to take a chance on this happening again, and we want to show the public also that we're *not* a bunch of perverted animals." And in those days there was a code office for the movies, it was first called the Hays Office and then the Johnson Office, and they used to censor the movies themselves. They had rules and you couldn't show too much cleavage, a woman couldn't be in bed with a man unless he was her husband, and all kinds of things like that. So we said, "We'll do the same thing, we'll have a code office." And in the movies the code was administered by a guy who was not responsible to the producers and he had the authority to say, "No, you cannot do that movie because it's too sexy or violent or whatever." So we did the same thing. We all chipped together, we hired a guy — a woman actually, I think ... I don't even remember, I think the first one was a woman, and she was the Code Administrator and she was independent and no publisher could tell her what to do, and all of the artwork was given to her and she passed on it. It all had to be approved by the Code before we could publish it.

DARREL: *How did whoever was in charge of the Code respond when you started doing the superheroes in the '60s?*

STAN: Oh, we had little problems but we never had much trouble. I don't feel our stuff was ever really violent or ever really sexy or ever really objectionable. In fact there were a lot of *funny* things with the Code, like once they objected that a puff of smoke from a gun was too big and so we made the puff of smoke smaller. And we did a story in SPIDER-MAN one time about drugs and they wouldn't approve it.

What had happened was a branch of the government called up one day and asked if we could do this, do a story to show how bad drugs are, because of the popularity of the comics with young people, and of

Beautiful portrait work of Stan Lee. Drawn by Gene Colan (1968).

Art © 1968-88 Eugene Colan

"The government asked if we could do a story to show

BUT, PETER PARKER, IF THE VERY LAST THING MARVEL'S CRITICS NEED...
I--NEVER FELT THIS WAY--BEFORE.
IT'S LIKE--I'M DROWNING--FALLING--DYING INSIDE! NOTHING SEEMS REAL--NOTHING HANGS TOGETHER...
THE PILLS! IT--MUST BE--THE PILLS...
THEY'RE DRIVING ME--OUT OF MY MIND!

Panels from the "non-coded" SPIDER-MAN stories written by Stan Lee (art by Kane & Romita)..

course we were happy to do it. So we did a story, the story had nothing to do with drugs but one of the subplots had one of the characters having his life ruined because of drugs, and we sent it to the Code and they wouldn't approve it. So I called up the Code office to find out why and they said we couldn't do a story with drugs, period. So I said, "But wait a minute, the government asked us to do this, the context of the story is that drugs are bad" — and it wasn't a preachy story, it was just a simple thing that showed how a life could be ruined through drugs — and I said, "What's wrong with that?" They said it was against the rules to mention drugs and that meant it was against the rules and we couldn't do it, it didn't matter to them what the context of the story was, typical bureaucratic thinking. So we went ahead and published those issues without the approval of the Code, and the government was happy and SPIDER-MAN survived and the kids got the message that drugs are bad, and we ended up getting a commendation from the PTA for that story.

But, I mean, those were the stupid, inane, ridiculous things that would happen. But still the Code served a good purpose and we learned to live with it, and it was no big deal.

DARREL: *There's a feeling that the Code, for whatever reason it exists, however good or bad it was, it caused comics to focus in certain areas and people had to kind of learn how to refine what they were doing to do it well in those areas.*

STAN: Well, I must be honest with you, I never was conscious of that. I don't think I wrote any stories differently with the Code than I would have written them without. In the days that I was doing them we didn't have as large an adult audience as you have now, and it wasn't as permissive a time as it is now, and even though we had a lot of high school and college kids reading our books, I was very conscious that a great many of our readers were young children, and I didn't want to do anything that would be offensive to a parent of a young child. So we just proceeded as if there were no Code because whatever the Code wanted us to do we were trying to do anyway.

DARREL: *Moving into the '60s, what do you see as the difference in what you did in the '60s as compared with what comics had been before?*

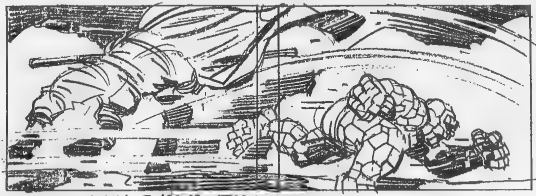
... and, yet another panel from the drug story.

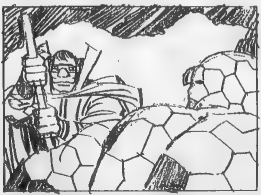
how bad drugs are, and the Code wouldn't approve it."

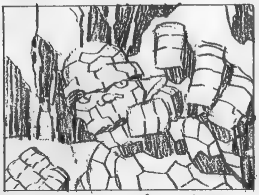
STAN: Well, I'll tell you the whole story. For years and years I had thought about getting out of comics because there were things I wanted to do that I thought couldn't be done in comics, like characters that were closer to real people and had problems that were like the everyday problems all people experience. I didn't think that comics could be done that way just because they wouldn't sell, the kids wouldn't be interested in buying them. So I would tell my wife I was going to quit and she'd say, "But, Stan, it's paying the rent, stay there a few more months." The next time I decided to quit it was, "But, Stan, it's paying the mortgage, stay there a few more months." So I never quite got out.

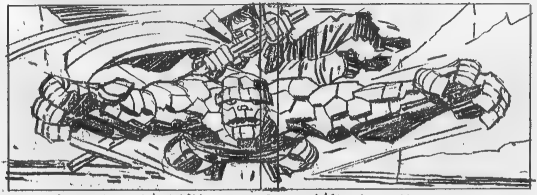
Then one time I said I was going to quit and she said, "Okay. But, Stan, I want you to do something first. You've always complained that you couldn't do comics the way you really want to do comics. Stay with it a few more months, do the comics

In this, the 2nd version of the FANTASTIC FOUR cartoon (Depatie-Freleng), Stan Lee provided the story, and, teamed (once, again) with co-creator/artist Jack "KING" Kirby (storyboards).









© 1979 Depatie-Freleng Enterprises, Inc

"They thought I was trying to portray

the way you want, get it out of your system." So I thought about it and it sounded like good advice, and I went into the office and started working on the Fantastic Four, and I made the characters the way I wanted, like the Human Torch was really just an obnoxious brat — *(In jest.)* as *all* teenagers are! *(Laughter.)* Then we put out THE FANTASTIC FOUR and it was a *hit!* Then we did SPIDER-MAN — and the when I showed it to the publisher he thought it was terrible, no one likes spiders, no one's going to want to read about a Spider-Man — and then SPIDER-MAN was a hit! So we did THE HULK, THE AVENGERS, THE X-MEN, all of them, and they were all hits!

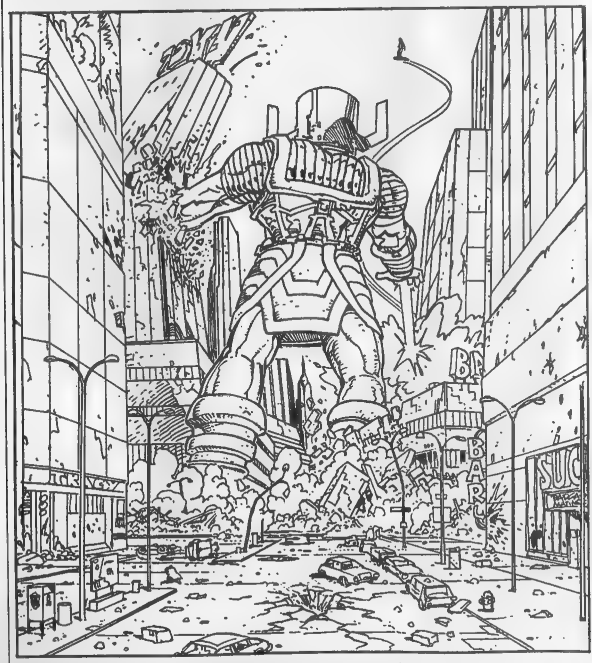
DARREL: *And Marvel hit it big.*

STAN: Yes!

DARREL: *Stan, about that same time comics fandom began to emerge. That coincidence, I wonder if there was some connection?*

STAN: Oh, sure. I honestly feel that Marvel was to a great extent responsible for the rise of fandom. You know, we were the company that started putting the names of all our writers, artists, inkers, editors and so on in our books, so like in the movies you got to know who was doing everything. Hardly anybody ever did that before. We also started our letters page, and I did that Bullpen Bulletins page where I talked to the readers.

DARREL: *And the No-Prizes.*



somebody who was Christlike."

Photo: Zata Zap

1977 photo of Stan the Man and DAK the Dude. Also from F.O.O.M. magazine (#17).

STAN: And the No-Prizes, and we formed a club, the MMMS, and I did my Soapbox, and I would refer to all of the other writers and artists in my columns and you got to know them better. I wanted to give our books a friendly feeling and have our fans think of themselves as much as our *friends* as our fans, and we felt they were. For many years I felt there was a

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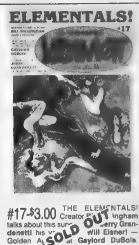

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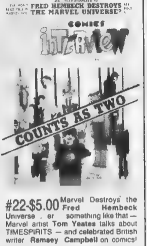

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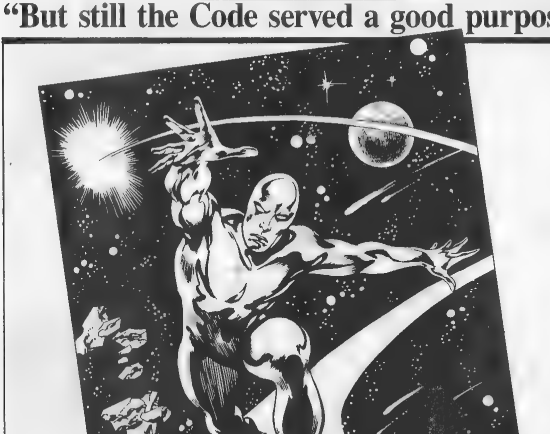
"But still the Code served a good purpose."



More of John Buscema's work.

nice warm feeling engendered by that.

I'll give you a funny example: When the people would write letters to us they would address them "Dear Stan" or "Dear Jack" or "Dear Steve" or "Dear Johnny." When they would write to DC Comics, which was called National in those days, the letters would say "Dear Editor." *(Laughter.)* And when they'd sign it with us they'd sign it "Charlie," and over at National they'd sign it "Charles." It was just a more formal feeling. We *tried* to engender a feeling of friendliness and warmth, and I think it came across. We really *liked* our readers, and our readers began to like us, and they cared about what we did and we cared about them. *(Call to give speech; conclusion en route.)*

DARREL: *Stan, as you look around today at the comics scene, the fandom, the industry, everything, are you pleased by what you see? Would you like anything different?*

STAN: Oh, no, I think it's *wonderful.* There are more fans now than ever, there are more comic-book stores, they've got 'em in every town in the country; there's more *interest* in comics than ever, the conventions are bigger and better than ever; I think it's absolutely wonderful! And it just seems to be growing all of the time. And there are more and more comics being done for older readers, comics are becoming more accepted in every segment of the population. I might add I hate to think that things are going so well with very little help from *me*, but there's nothing much I can do about that. *(Laughter.)* I really miss it. I used to feel I was so much a part of it, now I feel a little bit like a spectator, but I think things are moving along beautifully! *(Raises arms in victory salute.)* Excelsior!!!

"Stan is so full of creative energies

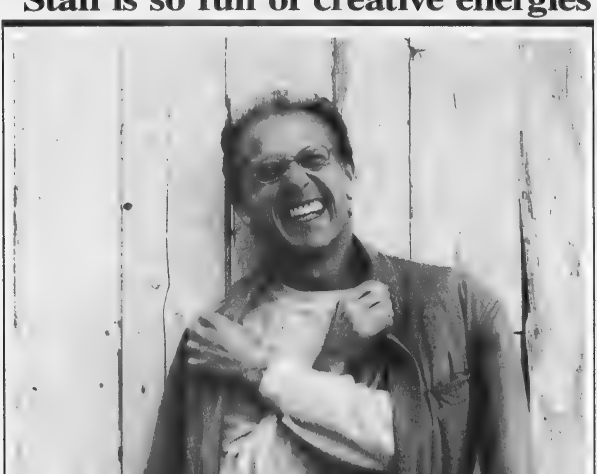


Photo: Gregory Preston

I first discovered Moebius in the early 1960s. At that time, his western series, LIEUTENANT BLUEBERRY, done under his real name of Jean Giraud (or more accurately "Gir"), was as much a staple in French comics as, say, THE AVENGERS or THE FLASH here

At the same time, being an avid science-fiction reader, I also admired the work of an artist who was doing a wonderful job illustrating SF short-stories in the French edition of GALAXY. That artist signed his work "Moebius," and I didn't realize he and Gir were one and the same, until writer Jacques Lob spelled it out in his Anthology of Comics.

Like many fans, I then often wondered why "Moebius," rather than "Giraud," didn't do actual science-fiction or fantasy comic-book stories. I didn't have to wonder for long. In 1973, with the publication of THE DETOUR (a rather appropriate title!) in the weekly magazine PILOTE, Moebius had finally arrived on the comics scene.

(Purists will almost certainly remark that Moebius had produced Kurtzman-Elder-inspired satirical strips in HARA-KIRI in the early 1960&s, but "nice kids" my age didn't read magazines like HARA-KIRI, so I didn't actually discover these early works until much later.)

A year later — in 1974 — Moebius and Philippe Druillet and a couple of other artists went the self-publishing route, and created the magazine METAL HURLANT. It's hard to explain, to anyone who wasn't there, the artistic and financial impact that METAL HURLANT had on the French comics scene.

Up to that point, the entire French-language comics industry (with a few exceptions, such as BARBARELLA) was totally dominated by juvenile adventure series. In the space of a year or two, not only had that domination ceased, but mighty publishing empires were forced to adapt — or disappear.

Moebius's METAL HURLANT career is presumably well known to those who have

All art accompanying this interview is © 1988 M.E.G., unless otherwise noted.

that it's hard to say no to him."

MOEBIUS

followed the Marvel series of graphic novels. With the publication of THE INCAL trilogy (written by Alexandro Jodorowsky), almost all of his major works done under that pseudonym will have been published in English.

In the meanwhile, as a breathing space between the completion of THE INCAL saga and the next BLUEBERRY story, Moebius collaborated with Stan Lee on a unique chapter in the life of THE SILVER SURFER.

Someone may point out that my doing an interview with Moebius is something of a conflict of interest, since I am not only one of his biggest fans, but also his friend, his business partner and, at times, his co-writer and editor. Yet, David Anthony Kraft felt that my personal relationship with the artist could help bring a special insight to this interview. Certainly, Moebius feels somewhat uncomfortable about his command of English, and French-speaking interviewers aren't easy to find!

This interview was conducted in French, after Moebius had finished drawing THE SILVER SURFER. I edited and translated our conversation for publication...

JEAN-MARC LOFFICIER: *I know we've been through it several times, but let's recap the origin of the SILVER SURFER project.*

MOEBIUS: Okay. I think it really took off when we had that lunch at the 1987 San Diego Comicon with **Stan Lee** and **Mike Hobson**. That's when I agreed to do it. Stan is so full of creative energies that it's hard to say no to him. But it sounded like a lot of fun. It was very exciting. We all got very excited. I had no idea at the time how difficult it would prove to be. That's what happens when an artist starts thinking like a publisher. A publisher doesn't have to worry about those sorts of things, because he's not the one who's going to have to do the work. In this case, I did, and it was very painful.

JEAN-MARC: *Really? Why? You can draw pretty much whatever you want.*

MOEBIUS: That's not quite true. The point is, it's always very difficult to do something that you've never done before, and do it in a way that remains faithful to yourself. If I had done a quick, hack job, you wouldn't be able to tell that it had been drawn by **Moebius**. As it is, there is no doubt that this is a product of my personality. So that's why it was difficult to do. But I always like to place myself in a position of risk, of danger, of facing the

"It's like, say, Franquin in Europe. You see these

unknown. When you stop doing that, you stop growing as an artist.

JEAN-MARC: *You also wanted to draw a real American comic book, didn't you?*

MOEBIUS: Yes, that was something I'd wanted to do for a long time. There is no way you can do that in France. It would look phony, fake. You've got to come here and be part of the system to do it.

JEAN-MARC: *So you must be happy now — You've got it out of your system.*

MOEBIUS: Actually, no, because I cheated. I came in as **Moebius** — you know, a big-name star. I didn't really become part of the system. To do that, I would have had to have done it like any other American artist, with an inker, a letterer, etc. It would have been interesting. As it is, it's different. It looks like an American comic-book, but it's not really one.

JEAN-MARC: *I think people here will say it looks European, and I'm equally certain that people in France will say it looks American.*

MOEBIUS: It's the first mid-Atlantic superhero! It makes bubbles! Glub, glub, glub! *(Laughter.)* I think this comes from the fact that I didn't use the graphic language that you find in typical American comics. There are certain ways of drawing expressions, the sky, the trees, the buildings, the clothes... There are a million such things. Artists don't draw reality, they encode it, and it evolves into a logical, coherent system that readers learn to recognize immediately without being even aware of it. It's like, say, **Franquin** in Europe. You see these big heads, round noses, and you just accept them because you're familiar with his graphic language. Or even before that, the drawings that the cavemen drew in Lascaux. To them, it probably meant a lot more than we can see today, because it followed their graphic language, it obeyed a symbology. And the only thing we see is stick figures...

Anyway, here, it's the same thing. There's a graphic language to American comics that I could have used, but I didn't because I'm too lazy. So I ended up doing

big heads, round noses, and you just accept them."

The cover to the Stan Lee/Moebius SILVER SURFER #1.

"I always like to place myself in a position

it my way, instead of forcing myself to fit into those rules.

JEAN-MARC: *But then it wouldn't have looked like Moebius, would it?*

MOEBIUS: Not at all! It would still be **Moebius**. Look, when I draw BLUEBERRY, I'm consciously and very rigidly following a set of graphic rules that are particular to the Western, but the result is still mine. You wouldn't say that it looks like anyone else. It's the same with superhero comics, I could have tried to follow the rules within my own style, but that would have required more time, and more energy than I wanted to spend.

JEAN-MARC: *Let's talk about superheroes. When did you discover them?*

MOEBIUS: I think the first superhero I read when I was a kid was CAPTAIN MARVEL, by C.C. Beck, and I loved it. I took it very seriously. I was really impressed, because there was a whole vision, a coherence to it. You could tell that it was done by someone who knew what he was doing.

JEAN-MARC: *What about SUPERMAN? BATMAN?*

MOEBIUS: No, I never read them at the time. I discovered them much later, when I was already a professional, and at that time, I wasn't very impressed. The art was just too cold. When I was a kid, the ones who really impressed me were the superheroes from the comic strips: THE PHANTOM, MANDRAKE, FLASH GORDON . . . Those were my childhood heroes. Plus, I read a lot of Italian comics that are almost totally forgotten today. Many of them had superhero characters, but I don't remember their names. I suspect they were very imitative of the American strips, but in a typical Italian way. It's like what they did with the spaghetti western, where they take a genre and they copy it, but at the same time, it's

# of risk, of danger, of facing the unknown."

HVIS DET VIRKELIG ER DIG DER STÅR FOR BALANCEN, HELLER DET GODE OG DET ONDE DU GØR DIT BEDSTE FOR AT HOLDE DEM I SKEL
GIV MIG EN CHANCE FOR AT BEVISE AT JEG HAR RET, FOR JEG VIL HAVE MIN HYLLE
HEY! JEG ER HÆNGER TO, HAN BORT, KAMP MOD SIG SELV
NUH? DE ER HELT IGEN HVAD SKER DER?
YES, HÆNGER BOSSE, KLOVT
HVAD DER SKAD-DE SIG SELV MED DEN MAND?
OH, DU MENER DEN "SUPERMAN" SOM HAR EVNERNE AF ALLE GUDERNE I SIN BEVÆGELSE FOR AT BESEJRE DE FORMØRKE FILOSOFIER
DEADMAN

Neal Adams at his very best... on DC Comics' Deadman. Consult your American original for translations.

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not a copy. It's different. It's more dramatic.

JEAN-MARC: *What about the French versions of SUPERMAN and BATMAN and the other DC stuff that came out in the Sixties in the books published by Aredit books?*

MOEBIUS: No, I didn't read those. Professionals looked down on that kind of stuff at the time. I mean, I knew they existed on an abstract level, but I didn't read them. I'd seen pages reproduced here and there in books about comics, but it hadn't really hit me. I really rediscovered superheroes with the French version of the Marvel Comics published by Editions Lug in... When was it?

JEAN-MARC: *That was in FANTASK, then STRANGE. That was in, let's see... 1970 or 1971?*

MOEBIUS: Yes, what happened was that, at the time, I was living in a kind of commune situation, and someone was buying them. So I started reading them, you know, just because they were there. And I was caught! Then I started buying the magazines, and I would go to comic stores looking for the issues I had missed! I became a real comic fiend for a few years!

JEAN-MARC: *Anything that you remember particularly?*

MOEBIUS: Hmmm... THE SILVER SURFER, definitely. That was the Buscema SURFER. When I looked through the issues that you lent me, I recognized the story with the Devil...

JEAN-MARC: *That's issue #3, with Mephisto...*

MOEBIUS: Yes, that was very powerful. I was incredibly impressed because you see, there was nothing like that in French comics at the time. It was a real breath of fresh air. Also, at the time, the comics intelligentsia in Paris started discovering artists like Neal Adams. His DEADMAN was the talk of the town at the time. The way he was doing his layouts in particular

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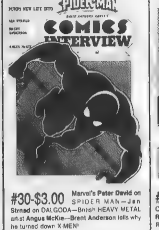

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"I had never worked with just a plot before."

The only "known" drawing/sketch of the SILVER SURFER by Neal "Continuity" Adams. Drawn for a comics fan at the San Diego Con. (1975).

was very impressive. It is only later that I discovered that, behind it all, there was really a visionary, an *auteur* if you wish, which was **Jack Kirby**. I remember some of his early FANTASTIC FOUR, too...

JEAN-MARC: *Let's talk about Jack Kirby for a minute. I know you think he's a genius...*

MOEBIUS: Yes. His stuff is incredibly powerful. Stan gave me a copy of THE SILVER SURFER trade paperback which he did with **Kirby** ten years ago, and it's magnificent. There is a vision and an energy contained in it that's just incredible

JEAN-MARC: *Is your SURFER more like Kirby's or Buscema's?*

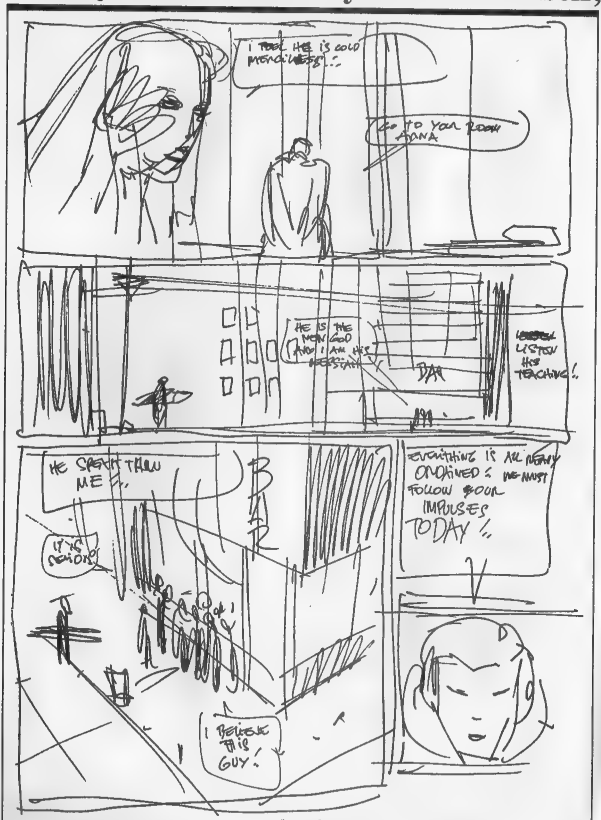
MOEBIUS: Frankly, neither. This is not a conscious act, it's a reflection of what I am inside. **Kirby's** SURFER is very powerful, massive, made of metal. **Buscema's** is very athletic. Mine is embued with grace. I see the SURFER as so powerful that everything he does, he does effortlessly. He does Tai-Chi, like me. *(Laughter.)*

JEAN-MARC: *How do you deal with the fact that the Surfer is a character created at least in major part by Kirby, and Marvel's lack of recognition of this fact?*

(A lengthy explanation of the dispute between Marvel and Kirby followed here, which was excised for reasons of space and, presumably, familiarity to the American reader.)

MOEBIUS: I see. Well, of course, it's unjust. But the way I see it, **Kirby** created these characters within a system that he knew. If he had wanted not to create them, he could have done so. He could have requested that they give him scripts, or existing characters. From what you're

"Kirby himself was very cruel to himself,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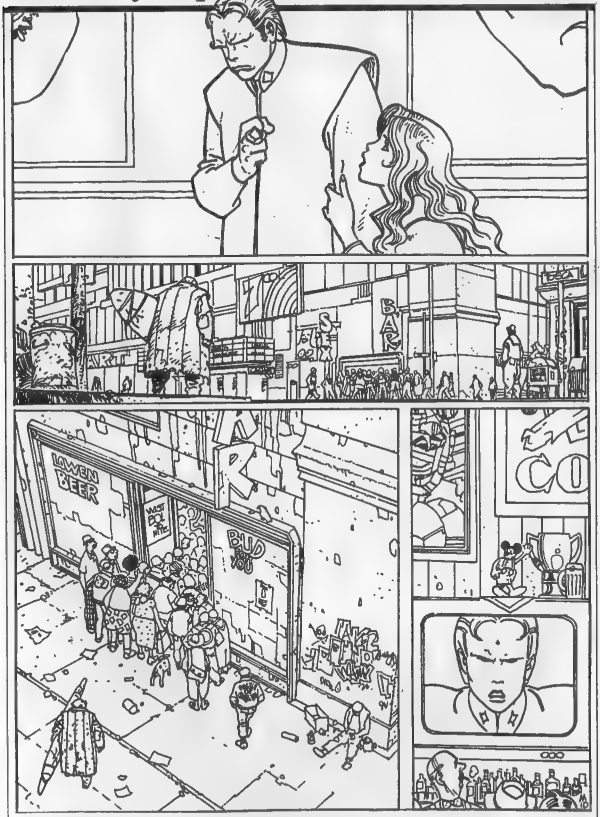
Layout from the Lee/Moebius SILVER SURFER comic, and...

because you put yourself in a situation."



. . . the finished page. Note: the changes made.

"Kirby's SURFER is very powerful, massive,

1970s poster art by Jack Kirby (pencils & inks).

saying, I gather that most of the other artists didn't work the way he did. From the moment he accepted to create characters in a system that he knew, without trying to change it or leave it, he became responsible.

I know it sounds cruel, but **Kirby** himself was very cruel to himself, because when you put yourself in a situation like this, you are doing harm to yourself. I'm sure that, even in America, there were examples of other artists who chose to either fight the system, or leave it, or negotiate with it. There must be other artists who chose not to let themselves be totally exploited, not to prostitute one hundred percent of their creativity to a system that was not going to give them any long-term returns. This is the real injustice, and **Kirby** himself committed it. I don't really understand why he collaborated with the system: it was either very myopic, or showed an incredible lack of faith in himself and his art.

I personally think that it is extremely offensive, and yes, insulting to **Kirby** himself, to pity him or refer to him as "poor" **Jack Kirby**, as you did, because it is robbing him of the responsibility for his actions. It's like if you were treating him as a child, which he wasn't. Yes, his case is cruel, but it also seems clear. He did what he wanted to do, what he had to do, maybe, and he knew what he was doing while he was doing it. To pity him now is like castrating him a *posteriori*, it is saying that he had no balls, no freedom, that he was just a puppet, someone easily manipulated. This is robbing him of his pride.

It strikes me at least, of as big an injustice, because I really don't think that this was the case. You just need to look at what **Kirby** was drawing then to see that this was a very vital man, a man who was drawing what he really wanted to draw. The very same way you can look at, say, **Frank Miller's** pages and see that he, too, is drawing what he really wants to draw.

JEAN-MARC: *Let's get back to the SURFER. So you thought it was a very*

made of metal. Buscema's is very athletic."

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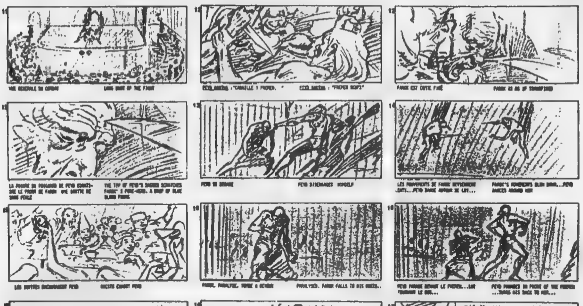

Detailed storyboards for director/writer Alexandro Jodorwsky's (never filmed) epic... Dune.

difficult assignment?

MOEBIUS: Yes, incredibly so. I was in a state of total panic for months. Even up to the last page before I had to draw the Surfer himself. I didn't know what I was going to do. It's very hard to inherit a character, which already has a given look that you must respect, and yet you want to, no, you MUST draw him the way you feel him. I had never done that before. That was very hard.

JEAN-MARC: *I'd have thought that you'd be very close to the character of the Surfer, because he is a more, well, spiritually oriented superhero...*

MOEBIUS: Yes, but it was still a totally new experience to me. Superheroes are very different from what I do. People put down superheroes because they think they're pretty juvenile and infantile, and there's a lot of terrible stuff being hacked out, and, of course, there's a certain amount of truth in that, but that's not the whole picture. I found that there's a magical energy, a vitality, in superheroes that's really attractive. I mean, the concept of a man who can fly harks back to one of Mankind's greatest and oldest dreams. The whole genre may be encased in juvenile trappings, but there's something very magical about it.

I think of the whole genre, and this kind of brings us back to **Kirby**, as very *"naif."* In spite of the incredible amount of visual sophistication and special effects, the American superhero, and especially the Kirby superhero, is this incredibly powerful *"naif"* art, like that, say, of **Douanier Rousseau**. Which does not mean simplistic, because it requires an enormous amount of sophistication to be that pure and simple. Like a child.

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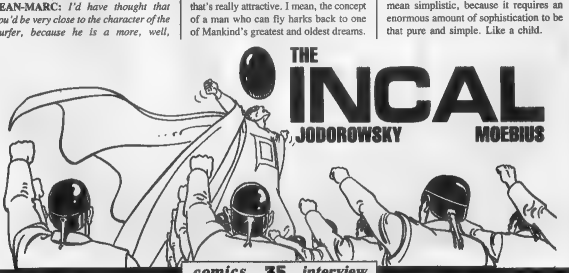

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"I've tried to do my b[illegible] I'm only a French artist."

JEAN-MARC: *How was working with Stan Lee?*

MOEBIUS: A dream! I had never worked with just a plot before, but I loved it. I found the story wonderful. It is full of personal and philosophical considerations, which I think are very, very interesting. It is obviously something very close to Stan's heart. It is not all pretty and nice and shallow, like a lot of the usual superhero stories. In fact, I found it a rather sad and dark story, like DARK KNIGHT, if you wish, but at the same time, it is cast in a different light.

When Stan gave me the dialogue, I was really impressed with the way he made all the characters speak each with their own voice. His language is very poetic, very beautiful — almost theatrical, in the best sense of the term. I'm sure some people would have preferred to see more action, but personally, I think it's more interesting to see a comic-book with a philosophical point of view. In many respects, I found Stan's story very modern, very political, and much closer to what today's young artists are trying to do.

JEAN-MARC: *Will you do it again?*

MOEBIUS: I don't know. Probably not. There are so many of my own projects that I need to work on now. The sequel to THE AIRTIGHT GARAGE (THE OTRA) and the next book in the AEDENA series (THE GODDESS), and the next BLUEBERRY... There's another American character that I'd like to do though. It's THE PHANTOM. Maybe in a couple of years...

JEAN-MARC: *Now that it's over, what's your feeling?*

MOEBIUS: That I'm glad it's over! *(Laughter.)*

JEAN-MARC: *But seriously, do you feel you've really accomplished something?*

MOEBIUS: I don't know. Not yet. Ask me again in two or three years, then I'll feel better able to answer you. Right now, I'm like an actor who has finished a film, which hasn't been released yet. He doesn't know how the public is going to react. The difference is that, if they hate it, an actor can blame the director, of the special effects, or the promotion, but I don't have anyone but myself to blame. If it bombs, I'll say, well, there are a few good pages. I've tried to do my best. I'm only a French artist after all!

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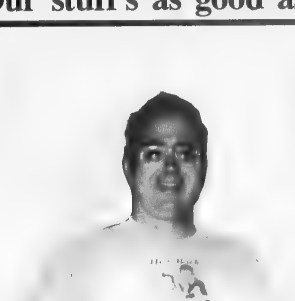

DENNIS MALLONEE

Dennis Mallonee is a man on his way. I don't quite think he's gotten there yet — but, given a bit more time, if Hero Comics takes root and flourishes, he may prove to be a Force to Contend With.

Dennis is co-creator (with Rick Hoberg) of ETERNITY SMITH, the science fiction-hero strip which began as an atypical Renegade comic and is now published, edited and written by Mallonee. Similarly, Dennis was instrumental in snaring the CHAMPIONS characters from the world of super-hero gaming to super-hero comics, first as an Eclipse mini-series and now as a Hero Comic; he wrote both. (The first Champions spin-off, THE MARKSMAN, has recently been published.) Finally, Roy and Dann Thomas stepped in with their offering, the original CAPTAIN THUNDER AND BLUE BOLT.

Hero Comics are about heroes. The protagonists personify the traditional heroic virtues, as SF-hero, super-hero or superteams. The comics present some interesting concepts and not a few interesting characters, such as Eternity Smith himself, most of the female characters who people the Champions, and the thundering twosome from two generations in two senses of the word. While I wouldn't put them in the same class as WATCHMEN or DARK KNIGHT, I do think they're worth a try.

For my part, this was different than my usual sort of interview; different in that I was not talking with a retired patriarch of comics history, but a contemporary creator; and different in that I've known Dennis for some years. Both of us shared a fanzine in common (COLLECTOR'S DREAM — only it went out of business before I could see print in it) and friends in common, most notably George' Olshevsky, Murray Ward and the small nexus of folks that forms at George's come San Diego Con time. Count yourself lucky that we didn't *talk about the Night of the Endless Bizarro Jokes . . .*

LOU MOUGIN: *Tell me something about your origin story, Dennis. What was the great moment that got you interested in comics?*

DENNIS MALLONEE: There were a few comics around when I was little and I picked them up and started reading them.

LOU: *What kinds?*

DENNIS: Various kinds, some Dell Comics, some SUPERMANs. Actually, as I remember — it was so long ago — what got me started reading comics was the SUPERMAN TV show. My brother and I used to sit and watch SUPERMAN twice a week. He would sit there munching on raw potatoes with salt, I would sit there trying to figure out why he liked raw potatoes with salt, and we'd watch SUPERMAN. Then I realized there was a magazine sitting there with Superman on the cover, so I picked it up and started reading it. I don't remember which one it was, but the first comic that I ever bought was ACTION #259 with one of the early Supergirl stories.

LOU: *I remember your columns as Dick O'Malley —*

DENNIS: Dick O'Malley was my nickname on my high school basketball team, they didn't want to try to pronounce **Mallonee.** *(Laughter.)*

LOU: *I know before you were . . . well, let's not get the cart before the horse. How did FANTASY BOOK come about?*

DENNIS: FANTASY BOOK came about because I had a friend who had been talking about doing a science-fiction magazine. I thought I could do something along those lines, but there were so many science-fiction magazines that I decided I'd do something else. At the time, there weren't any magazines devoted exclusively to fantasy fiction so I did that from 1981 to 1986. And FANTASY BOOK will be coming back this summer.

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"We have to overcome the perception that

...STRAIGHT UP. HUH? WISH I'D THOUGHT OF THAT.
MIGHT'VE SAVED ME SOME WEAR AND TEAR.
YOU DID GREAT, DAD.
HELL, IF WE BOTH THOUGHT EXACTLY ALIKE, WOULDN'T BE ANY REASON FOR US TO BE A TEAM, WOULD THERE?

LOU: *It sort of took a leave of absence while you were getting Hero Comics off the ground.*

DENNIS: Well, FANTASY BOOK never made a lot of money for us and I couldn't justify spending money on it when I was trying to get other projects started.

LOU: *Dennis, there's fifty-eleven-dozen comics companies out on the racks right now —*

DENNIS: There's not *that* many.

LOU: *Almost, and there's fifty jillion books, so why should I buy a Hero comic?*

DENNIS: Well, because we're producing better stuff than most of those other companies.

LOU: *How so?*

DENNIS: It's hard to explain unless you sit down and actually read the material. I think the quality of our stories is better, the quality of our artwork is *highly* professional, and I think that by and large we're producing stories that people should *want* to read if they're at all interested in the graphic story medium. Our books are superior.

LOU: *Why are they superior?*

DENNIS: To a large extent in subjective, but there are also objective criteria. I'm a writer; I write some of the books.

Roy and Dann Thomas are both writers; they write CAPTAIN THUNDER AND BLUE BOLT, and will be doing the bulk of the graphic story material in FANTASY BOOK. But there are a lot of people working in the comic-book industry who simply do not know how to write. I promise you that at Hero Comics we will never produce a book that isn't well written.

LOU: *What's the industry reaction been to Hero Comics?*

DENNIS: We seem to have gathered some respect.

LOU: *You've had some favorable comments?*

DENNIS: Yes. People I've talked to already seem to think of Hero Comics on the same level as the *better* independents. That isn't enough, but it's a start.

LOU: *What obstacles does Hero Comics face and how do you plan to overcome them, circumvent them, whatever?*

DENNIS: Distribution. We need to get our books out there to the people who are likely to buy them. We have to overcome that lingering problem with fan perception that Marvels and DCs are the only products worth buying. That's a problem for *all* the independents, not just us.

LOU: *True.*

DENNIS: In our case, since we're

Captain Thunder and Blue Bolt — one of the few father and son superhero teams, scripted by husband and wife team Roy and Dann Thomas.

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Dennis Mallonee

Born: Compton, CA — 22 January 1955; I'm an Aquarius, one of those people who have to carry the weight of the world on their shoulders

Occupation: Writer and Publisher of Hero Comics

Credits: FANTASY BOOK; Hero Comics titles; I've also written a couple of stories for Marvel, an IRON MAN fill-in and a few SOLO AVENGERS

Favorite SF Hero: Kimball Kinnison, the Gray Lensman, literary progenitor of the Green Lantern Corps

Favorite Single Comic Book: ETERNITY SMITH, even though the stories rarely surprise me when I see them in print; GROO, I like Sergio's plots

Favorite Movie: MY FAIR LADY

only Marvels and DCs are worth buying."

producing stuff that's at least as good as 90% of what Marvel or DC produces, it may not take us much longer to overcome that. But until we do overcome it, the problem still exists.

LOU: *What have the sales been like on the various books so far?*

DENNIS: Much lower than we would have liked. In numerical terms, the direct market is not supporting Hero Comics as well as we think it should be supporting Hero Comics, so we're looking for alternative forms of distribution.

LOU: *Like what, the bookstores, the newsstands?*

DENNIS: Chain bookstores, for example. We're in Waldenbooks beginning in August. We're also sending several thousand copies to Europe and the Pacific Rim.

LOU: *Which Hero Comics comic is doing best?*

DENNIS: CHAMPIONS sells 10% to 25% above any of the others.

LOU: *What influenced you in the writing of CHAMPIONS, any of the classic Marvel teams and such like that?*

DENNIS: All of the classic superhero teams. The original mini-series was designed in many respects as a tribute to *all* the old hero teams. There's a little bit of the Justice League in there, there's a little bit of the Avengers, there's a little bit of the X-Men. CHAMPIONS was designed as a fun book. And before you ask, the story behind CHAMPIONS is: I was down in San Diego a few years ago, sitting in on a presentation being made by the folks at Hero Games, who own the CHAMPIONS role-playing game, and one of the questions from the audience was, "When are you going to do a comic book based on the game?" The person in the audience didn't know it but Hero Games had looked into the possibility of doing a comic book to package into the boxed version of the game, but when they found out how enormously expensive it is to produce a color comic book they dropped the project. But what the Hero Games people didn't understand, because they weren't familiar with the comic-book industry, was that at that time, with so many publishers springing up looking for good product, it *shouldn't* have been very difficult for them to find someone to publish the book *for* them. So I volunteered to get the comic done for them, just on a whim —

LOU: *Right there?*

DENNIS: Right then and there. Later, after we'd discussed what they wanted to see in a CHAMPIONS comic, and I discovered that what they wanted to see was very much what I wanted to do, I decided I would write it myself. Then we started asking around to see if anyone might be interested in doing the comic book, and Eclipse said that they would be.

LOU: *All at this presentation?*

DENNIS: No, the Eclipse commitment came a few months later. I wanted to come up with the concept before I tried to market it. Unfortunately, Eclipse marketed it not as a comic book, but as a game tie-in, which probably ended up hurting sales. Nor was was the Champions comic ever envisioned as a limited series; it was envisioned as a continuing comic book.

LOU: *Have you played CHAMPIONS?*

DENNIS: Since it first appeared.

LOU: *I think I recall playing it with you at one of the cons, I was Tex Arcana.*

DENNIS: That's right, the gunslinging magic cowboy, I remember that.

LOU: *Since that was one of your creations, we ought to see him in the comic one of these days.*

DENNIS: Well, I think there's another Tex Arcana character.

LOU: *Oh, right, the HEAVY METAL thing.*

DENNIS: Mine was first.

LOU: *But you didn't copyright him first.*

DENNIS: Well, I was never in a position to claim a trademark. But there are fine points in the trademark laws, and if we wanted to we could probably use my Tex as a character in the comic.

LOU: *How did you go about doing the series? Did you sit down and play out a scenario on this thing?*

DENNIS: There were a couple of stages. The original series was not envisioned as a team comic, but Eclipse insisted on a team comic. I thought it was a bad idea, I *still* think it was a bad idea, because that meant I had to present everything all at once instead of taking time to develop the individual characters.

LOU: *Yes, it is a little difficult to get a handle on all the characters when you're being presented with all of them at the same time.*

DENNIS: Character development is the reason we were having so many short 8-to-10-page stories in the first Hero Comics issues. Readers need to be able to get a feel for who these people are. But to get back to how we went about it, the original presentation included several of those 8-to-10-page stories, each featuring a single characters. Rose was our mystic, Icestar was our straight superhero, the Marksman was into espionage. Some of those original stories, by the way, have now been seen in one form or another; never throw anything away, always make use of whatever you have. But when I found out in conversations with **Cat Yronwode** and **Dean Mullaney** that Eclipse was insisting we do a team book, I took the basic concepts that were in those early stories and tried to come up with a

Rose, from The Champions.

"CHAMPIONS sells 10 to 25% better."

storyline in which I could still use all three of those elements. I needed a major villain. Or perhaps I needed an organization that could touch on all three of those aspects. That's where DEMON came in. DEMON is a scientific organization with a political arm, and they're always looking for ways to use occult artifacts to their own advantage.

LOU: *Your Hydra kind of thing.*

DENNIS: Something like that. But where Hydra got pretty boring pretty quickly, DEMON won't. It's a very useful organization for plotting purposes because not all of the arms of DEMON are the same, we can use DEMON on several different occasions and never have it be quite the same thing.

LOU: *Whatever you want they've got.*

DENNIS: To some extent that's true. But even so, DEMON is not going to be around forever, I expect. The person who created DEMON — a very bright fellow named **Andy Robinson** — built weaknesses into the structure of the organization that can be exploited by people who can figure out how the structure works. And the Champions are not stupid.

LOU: *So you started out with a solo concept and made it into a team concept, and you're currently doing both, with team stories in the front of the book while you have back-up stories devoted to the individuals.*

DENNIS: Yes.

LOU: *And with a page or two in each issue, you've also been providing Champions game statistics for some of the characters in the comic. By the way, not being a gamer myself, the system of points and attributes and all of this type of thing is pretty Greek.*

DENNIS: But the stories work on their own merits. If you're not a gamer, you don't have to worry about those sort of things.

LOU: *Have any of your characters been picked up by the game?*

DENNIS: I've written a couple of the supplements for the role-playing game — "The Great Super-Villain Contest" and "The Coriolis Effect." Several of my characters also appeared in the third "Enemies" supplement.

LOU: *Do these come from characters that were introduced in the comic?*

DENNIS: No, none of them were introduced in the CHAMPIONS comic book; they came out of the game that we play down here in southern California. It may be that at some point there will be a game supplement featuring characters from the comic book, but that decision wouldn't be up to me. It would be up to the people at Iron Crown Enterprises, who have the license from Hero Games for producing CHAMPIONS role playing game supplements at this time.

LOU: *Well — it's hard to form a question about this — but why did you do the Galloping Galooper?*

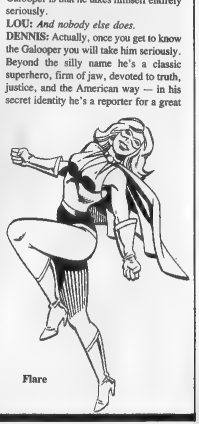
DENNIS: Oh, that's a joke.

LOU: *Yes, I hope so!* (Laughter.)

DENNIS: The Galloping Galooper. On the face of it, he's a silly character and I needed a silly character for the story in the first Hero Comics issue of CHAMPIONS, so I chose him. He's a very silly character, but the joke about the Galooper is that he takes himself entirely seriously.

LOU: *And nobody else does.*

DENNIS: Actually, once you get to know the Galooper you will take him seriously. Beyond the silly name he's a classic superhero, firm of jaw, devoted to truth, justice, and the American way — in his secret identity he's a reporter for a great



"I needed a silly character for the first issue."

metropolitan newspaper. The story told by the person who created him — again, **Andy Robinson** — is that when the Galooper was an infant he was found by a pair of Midwestern farmers out in a field playing beside a spaceship that was obviously part of some secret NASA project. The only evidence the Galooper has of his origin is a small glowing golden rock that he keeps as a memento.

LOU: *So that's the story on the Galloping Galooper. Which CHAMPIONS character do you enjoy writing the most?*

DENNIS: Rose.

LOU: *She's my favorite. I like reading her stories in THE MARKSMAN, which was the first spin-off title you had from CHAMPIONS. How did the Marksman get picked for that?*

DENNIS: We thought he was the character who would best sell a solo title. It turned out we were wrong.

LOU: *And you aren't writing the Marksman stories in that.*

DENNIS: Right. Out of four current Hero titles, I'm writing only 2 1/2.

LOU: *Do you feel differently about editing somebody else's, as opposed to your own stuff?*

DENNIS: That's a good question. For me, it's more difficult to edit, I think, than it is to write. With **Steve Perrin** working on MARKSMAN . . . I should preface this by saying that the CHAMPIONS comic is very tricky. There are some very *delicate* personality interplays among them. When Steve writes *only* the Marksman it's not a problem because Steve understands how the Marksman works. But when Steve brings in *other* characters, like Rose and Icestar, an editorial hand is required because what you see in THE MARKSMAN has to gibe with what you see in CHAMPIONS.

LOU: *So now you can have some appreciation for the editorial hassles that DC and Marvel go through when they have —*

DENNIS: Frankly I have *no* appreciation of the editorial capacity at Marvel and DC. Those companies are so fragmented editorially that *nobody* has a firm hand on anything that's going on there, and their product suffers for it.

LOU: *So you think that the lack of a single unifying viewpoint hampers Marvel and DC?*

DENNIS: I think that from the beginning the lack of a single *vision* has crippled DC creatively, and in recent years Marvel has begun suffering from that.

LOU: *So you think that by having your own vision at work at Hero you can avoid such a problem as that?*

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"Frankly, I have *no* appreciation of the editorial capacity at Marvel and DC."

DENNIS: I hope to be able to. I think that by and large **Roy Thomas** and I have the same vision of what heroic fiction in the graphic story medium should be. There are subtle differences, but I don't think he and I differ in the basics.

LOU: *As opposed to, say, an antiheroic thing?*

DENNIS: As opposed to . . . yeah. There *are* some comic-book writers who don't grasp what heroism is all about.

LOU: *Anybody in —*

DENNIS: I'm not naming any names.

LOU: *Let me ask you a frivolous question: Which one of the Champions do you most identify with?*

DENNIS: Oh . . . which one? It's difficult to say, it really is.

LOU: *Which one did you play most when you were playing CHAMPIONS?*

DENNIS: I never played any of them. They were all characters that were taken from the original CHAMPIONS campaign, and I was never involved in that.

LOU: *Then let's get back to the original question. Which one do you identify the most with?*

DENNIS: Well, let's see . . . there's Icestar, there's Flare, there's Marksman, there's Rose . . . Actually, I think I identify with Dark Malice. She's so much better than the Champions, and she knows it. I hate to admit it, but there's a lot of me in that character.

LOU: *I can understand that. If you write a good villain it becomes very easy to identify with that character, as in the case I'd say of Miller's Kingpin or Wolfman's villains — villains who seem to know what the heck they're doing.*

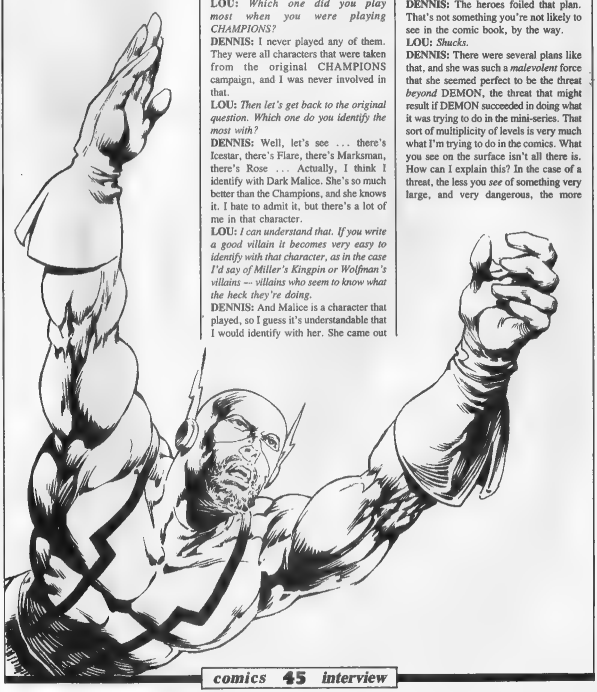
DENNIS: And Malice is a character that played, so I guess it's understandable that I would identify with her. She came out of our campaign down here in southern California. She's the embodiment of hatred, and the first plan she came up with in our campaign was to steal the Ark of the Covenant from the Army storage depot where it had been stored since before World War II, and open it in the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City.

LOU: *Oh my God!*

DENNIS: The heroes foiled that plan. That's not something you're not likely to see in the comic book, by the way.

LOU: *Shucks.*

DENNIS: There were several plans like that, and she was such a *malevolent* force that she seemed perfect to be the threat *beyond* DEMON, the threat that might result if DEMON succeeded in doing what it was trying to do in the mini-series. That sort of multiplicity of levels is very much what I'm trying to do in the comics. What you see on the surface isn't all there is. How can I explain this? In the case of a threat, the less you *see* of something very large, and very dangerous, the more



"I find women more interesting, but

BUT WHAT ARE YOU DOING UP SO EARLY? IT ISN'T EVEN DARK YET.
PERHAPS I WANTED TO SURPRISE YOU, AND DISCOVER WHAT SYRAT: EGADS YOU WERE PLOTTING BEHIND MY BACK.
OR, PERHAPS I SIMPLY NEEDED YOU TO COMFORT ME.
YOU MAY HAVE BEEN RIGHT.

One of Dennis' interesting twists — Sylvia, a female vampire superheroine!

dangerous and threatening it can be imagined to be. In the mini-series, DEMON was an obvious threat, but if DEMON wins, what happen next?

LOU: *One of the more fascinating characters in CHAMPIONS is the female vampire character from issues four and five of the Hero series.*

DENNIS: Sylvia, thank you.

LOU: *Is she one of your creations?*

DENNIS: Yeah. Sort of.

LOU: *How was she originated?*

DENNIS: She's never been in the game; she was created specifically for the comic book. But she was inspired in part by something that was connected with the game. There's a club publication — THE ADVENTURERS CLUB — that Hero Games does. Foxbat had a letters column in the first few issues; people would write in and say their heroes could beat him up, and Foxbat would reply that he didn't care because he would never fight them. It was *that* sort of column. We did it a few times in the comics, but it's a joke that gets pretty tired pretty fast. In an effort to make the letters column a little more serious, Foxbat was blown up and a sexy female character took his place. I didn't use *that* particular character, but the idea of a female counterpart to Foxbat led to the notion of a vampire who wasn't really all that dangerous, and who stayed around because she thought Foxbat was amusing. That's where Sylvia came from

LOU: *You said you liked writing Rose best, and she's my favorite of all the Champions, so I have to ask how she was created.*

DENNIS: Rose came from the original CHAMPIONS campaign run by the folks up at Hero Games in the San Francisco area, but she's not quite the same character in the comic that she was in the original CHAMPIONS campaign. When it came time to figure out which of the dozen or so heroes out of the original CHAMPIONS campaign would be featured in the comic, I selected a handful that I thought would work particularly well. Icestar was an obvious choice, a rash, arrogant, eager superhero type. He owes more conceptually to the Flash than to anyone else; he can do some amazing things with his cold that you wouldn't expect anyone to do.

LOU: *I would have assumed Iceman.*

DENNIS: No, surprisingly he doesn't owe that much conceptually to the Iceman, who's been an unrealized character from the the beginning, though **Louise and Walt Simonson** have done some good things with him of late. Anyway, there was Icestar, and there was the Marksman for espionage, and there was Rose. She had mental powers and teleportation in the campaign, and since I wanted some sort of mysticism in the book to go along with the other stuff, she became a young psychic detective who sort of moonlights as a superhero.

LOU: *The female characters in CHAMPIONS are a lot more interesting than the men, at least to me.*

DENNIS: I find women more interesting than men, but women have never been handled well in the comics.

LOU: *You don't think so?*

DENNIS: No, I don't think they have been. I think we've gone from the stereotype of the weak helpless female to the stereotype of the **Chris Claremont** woman.

LOU: *What would you think of Mike Sekowsky's Wonder Woman and Supergirl?*

DENNIS: I think **Mike Sekowsky**'s Wonder Woman was a very good character. I hated his Supergirl. It wasn't Supergirl. Had he created some other character for the things he did . . . You know, I've always *liked* Supergirl. I fell in love with Supergirl! As I said earlier, the first comic book I ever bought was one with Supergirl in it. I really hated it when they killed her.

they've never been handled well in comics."

LOU: *Same here, definitely.*

DENNIS: I think she could have been done right. She shouldn't have been treated as a junior version of Superman.

LOU: *The problem with female characters in comic books is, as you said, the weak helpless character — the Invisible Girl stereotype — or basically the character that never does anything wrong and is very tough and takes no crap from men — the Power Girl stereotype. I find both pretty detestable. It would be interesting if they just decided to write them as characters.*

DENNIS: As people. I have four sisters, and when I grew up I had real women around. I know what women are like, and they're not that different from men. There are different emphases because there are physical differences, and there are differences in the way men and women are raised, but at root women are people and men are people and that's how they should be written.

LOU: *Well — switching topics now — the first character you created for comic books, at least as far as I know, was Eternity Smith. How did that character come about?*

DENNIS: That was a cocreation with **Rick Hoberg.** We sat down to try to come up for a project for the 16-page books Eclipse was going to do a couple of years back, the books that evolved into AIRBOY and NEW WAVE.

LOU: *The latter of which has already passed on.*

DENNIS: Yes, and AIRBOY is no longer a 16-page book. Eclipse discovered that, for whatever reason, the format didn't work as well as they thought it might. Anyway, Rick and I wanted to come up with something in a heroic vein, something suitable for a strong central character. I had been toying with the idea of some kind of science-fiction concept, but it's not clear in a lot of cases who came up with which ideas. Whenever creative people sit down to talk about things, ideas will be thrown out, and someone else will take the ball and run with it, so it's never clear who came up with what concept.

LOU: *Right.*

DENNIS: The name Eternity Smith was Rick's. It came from an animation project that he and his wife Aleta had developed. When I suggested that I wanted to do a contemporary strip but Rick indicated that he wanted to get some advanced scientific technology into it, the best way to do that seemed to be to have someone come back from the future *with* the technology. We wanted something evocative, and Rick suggested the name Eternity Smith. If we were going to do that concept, then I wanted the strip to be a tribute of sorts to the old pulp science fiction, so since we were using the name Smith I thought we should give his daughter the name Skylark as an homage to the classic works of **E.E. "Doc" Smith.** Skylark, by the way, is an integral part of the concept for the

RIGHT? YOU'RE ADMITTING I WAS RIGHT ABOUT SOMETHING?
MY REPOSE HAS BEEN RUDELY INTERRUPTED, MY DARLING. I CAN FEEL SOMETHING AMISS. PERHAPS, IT MAY BE THAT I SHOULD NOT HAVE BITTEN THAT SECURITY GUARD LAST NIGHT.
I GAVE IN TO IMPULSE. AND THAT, I HAVE LEARNED OVER THESE MANY YEARS, IS OFTEN A MISTAKE.
YOU WERE WISE TO KILL ME, AGENT HASTINGS.
THEN WE WERE RIGHT?

"We've divorced science from technology."

series. We needed someone Smith could relate to — after being in the 21st century for ten years of his life — who had been here all along, and we chose a father/daughter relationship because that's something we haven't really seen much of in the comics. And if we were going to use the name Skylark, then she just had to be a singer. Once we'd figured out that Sky had to be a singer, it came full circle; Rick pulled out characters from the concept that the name Eternity Smith had originally come from, and we had Skylark's band. It worked out serendipitously; from the concept to the name, to the concept, to more names, to characters, to an unrelated concept, and back to the original concept again. In that one session, we had the whole thing. Eternity Smith comes back and gets involved with people who are already involved in the interesting sorts of things we want to have him involved with.

LOU: *So Eternity Smith becomes kind of a Buck Rogers in reverse.*

DENNIS: Buck Rogers comes home!

LOU: *Right, instead of falling asleep and going ahead to the 25th century, he comes back from the 21st century.*

DENNIS: The 21st century because we didn't want to get *too* far ahead of current technology. We wanted to be able to use things — with a few exceptions, like the time-phasing technology is something *we* will never see — that we *will* be seeing from technology that's conceivable now.

LOU: *Right. This is the first time I've seen pages explaining computer technology inside a comic book, that's kind of interesting. What in particular are you trying to do with ETERNITY SMITH?*

DENNIS: Right now, I'm simply trying to write a science-fiction story with continuing characters. But SMITH was envisioned originally as *more* than just a comic book; the first six issues are really a storyboard for a movie. We adapted the movie into comic books before the movie was even made. *(Laughter.)* And if you look at it with an eye toward merchandising, you'll see in SMITH toys, games, puzzles —

LOU: *The stuff you can merchandise from a movie.*

DENNIS: It's a multimedia design. We had a very *strong* concept, and we were trying to figure out all the different ways we could go with it.

LOU: *How is it ETERNITY SMITH got changed from a Renegade series to a Hero series?*

DENNIS: It wasn't working well for **Deni Loubert.** Deni doesn't do that kind of book, and people don't expect that kind of book from Renegade Press. It was better, I think, for all parties for us to take it over. Actually, there was a contributing factor in that. When Eclipse declined to continue the CHAMPIONS comic, and when I decided, being as stubborn as I am, to do it anyway, it made sense for us to take ETERNITY SMITH the same way, since it wasn't working well for Deni.

LOU: *And start your own comic-book company, so to speak.*

DENNIS: Well, start publishing comics. I've had a publishing company since 1981, when we started publishing FANTASY BOOK.

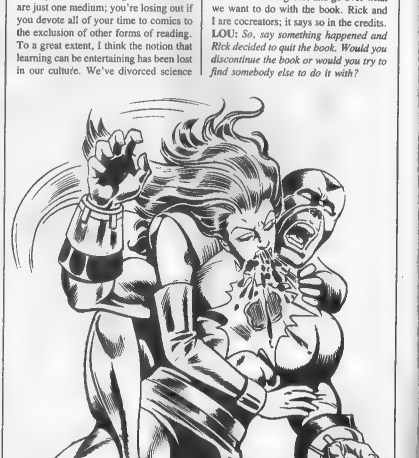
LOU: *What's the most difficult part of writing ETERNITY SMITH?*

DENNIS: I don't find writing difficult at all.But you asked what I'm trying to do with ETERNITY SMITH. Part of what I'm trying to do is to get people to sit down and *read.* Not just the comic books they're looking at, but other things. Comic books are just one medium; you're losing out if you devote all of your time to comics to the exclusion of other forms of reading. To a great extent, I think the notion that learning can be entertaining has been lost in our culture. We've divorced science from technology in our culture, and that's a damn shame because science is as much fun as anything else. You can look at a television set, for example — that's technology — but getting down there and finding out *why* a television works, what you can do to make it work better, that's the *challenging* part. That's science, and *that* can be fun! ETERNITY SMITH is designed to be fun — that's how it relates to this — and fun is important, but there's more to it than that. I want people to look past the *gloss,* and see what's under the surface.

LQU: *Do you work differently on ETERNITY SMITH than on CHAMPIONS?*

DENNIS: Yes. With CHAMPIONS, I do the plot and send it to **Chris Marrinan,** who interprets it in his style and sends it back to me for scripting. With ETERNITY SMITH it works differently; Rick and I sit down together and go over what we want to do with the book. Rick and I are cocreators; it says so in the credits.

LOU: *So, say something happened and Rick decided to quit the book. Would you discontinue the book or would you try to find somebody else to do it with?*



"There's no such Hero Comics Universe."

DENNIS: It would depend on the particular circumstances at the time. I don't think Rick will quit the book, because Rick owns half the character; I don't think I would quit the book, because I own half the character. Not as long as there's a possibility of bringing in some licensing money, merchandising — not as long as we enjoy the character. Eternity Smith is an *excellent* character, well suited for movies, for television, for almost anything you can think of, it's just a question of realizing the revenue that is potentially there.

LOU: *And CHAMPIONS is not so much a collaboration, right?*

DENNIS: Well, not so much. But Chris certainly contributes. And his contribution improves with each issue. The first comic-book work he did was on the second issue of that Eclipse mini-series. Compare his artwork now with what he did then, and you'll see an enormous difference. Chris is going to be recognized as a major comic-book talent within the next three or four years. He's already been tapped to take over the art chores on Wonder Woman

LOU: *Well, to me your series, CHAMPIONS and ETERNITY SMITH, read better as series rather than book by book. Do you encounter any problems with that as far as people not picking up on the series if they haven't read the first issue or so?*

DENNIS: No, that wasn't a problem because we make back issues available. With the exception of the fifth and final Renegade issue of ETERNITY SMITH, if there's an issue you don't have you *can* get it.

LOU: *How have the back-issue sales gone?*

DENNIS: Back-issue sales have been steady. What we found when we started was that people would write in and ask us to send all six issues of the CHAMPIONS mini-series, and all five issues of ETERNITY SMITH. What we're seeing now is people asking for all six issues CHAMPIONS mini-series issues plus the first three Hero Comics issues, all five ETERNITY SMITHs plus the first three Hero Comics issues.

LOU: *So whenever someone picks up a current one they're apt to buy all of the back issues to catch up?*

DENNIS: That seems to be the case.

LOU: *Tell me something about CAPTAIN THUNDER AND BLUE BOLT. How did you and Roy and Dann come to decide to put that out?*

DENNIS: I'd been trying to get Roy to write a short story for FANTASY BOOK for several years.

DAD... DO YOU EVER WISH YOU'D NEVER GOTTEN YOUR LIGHTNING-POWERS? I MEAN, BEING CAPTAIN THUNDER AND SORT OF SCREW UP YOUR LIFE.
MAYBE I'D HAVE SCREWED IT UP ANYWAY.
FEEDING PENNIES INTO YESTERDAY'S WISHING WELL IS JUST THROWING GOOD MONEY AFTER BAD, SON.
CAN'T CHANGE THE PAST. NO WAY.
BUT WE CAN CLEAR YOUR NAME— THAT'S WHAT IS ALL ABOUT ISN'T IT?
THAT... AND STAYING ALIVE.

LOU: *A barbarian type story?*

DENNIS: *Any* type story. I wanted to see how Roy would handle prose, but he could never find the time. So when we decided to start publishing comics, I went to Roy and Dann and said, "Okay, you never have had the time to do a prose story for me, so do a comic book." They were very agreeable to that, because they want to do work with companies other than DC and Marvel.

LOU: *So the Thomases are seeking to branch out to other companies?*

DENNIS: They don't want to limit their options.

LOU: *So we have CAPTAIN THUNDER AND BLUE BOLT, almost an INFINITY, INC. type concept with the parent/child superheroes there.*

DENNIS: Yes. The concept works well, but Roy lost the Justice Society and could no longer do it with Infinity, so we're seeing some of it here.

LOU: *Also on CAPTAIN THUNDER AND BLUE BOLT, it's interesting to see the thing where the older generation is from the 1960s rather than World War II, which is what we usually see.*

DENNIS: I wanted to stay away from World War II, if we could. We've talked about doing a CHAMPIONS spin-off set in the era just before World War II, but I wanted to start out with something contemporary, and I wanted to see something with a *strong* lead character. But Roy likes to do team books, and he likes old-time heroes, and he does them well. So this was sort of a compromise. With CAPTAIN THUNDER AND BLUE BOLT we have something that's sort of like a team, and it's sort of like an old-time superhero comic since we've created an old-time superhero for it, and it's still a contemporary book with strong characters. The compromise has worked well, I think. Roy and Dann are doing some of the best work they've ever done in comics on CAPTAIN THUNDER AND BLUE BOLT. I just wish more people would pick it up and realize that.

LOU: *With ETERNITY SMITH and CHAMPIONS and the CHAMPIONS spin-offs and CAPTAIN THUNDER AND BLUE BOLT ... it almost seems like you're laying the foundation for a Hero Comics Universe. Do you have any plans along those lines?*

DENNIS: There's no such thing as a Hero Comics Universe. But, that having been said, we still want people who read one Hero Comics title to be comfortable picking up another Hero Comics title.

LOU: *Do Eternity Smith and the Champions exist in the same continuum?*

DENNIS: Smith exists in the same *sort* of world that the Champions live in. It's

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"We're not *only* into crass commercialism."

a world in which there are *not* a lot of super-powered people, which is largely the same as our own world, but with some differences. The world that the Champions operate in has a little bit of magic and a little more highly advanced technology; the world Smith operates in has a little more highly advanced technology and there *may* be some elements of magic in it. Characters could move comfortably from one book to the other *if* we decided we wanted to have a crossover story.

LOU: *But could we say that Eternity Smith and the Champions are all on, say, Earth-H or something?*

DENNIS: I wouldn't say so. Let's put it this way: if you're reading ETERNITY SMITH, you don't have to know what goes on in CHAMPIONS. If you're reading CHAMPIONS, you don't have to know what goes on in ETERNITY SMITH. But if at some point we decide that we would like to have a character from ETERNITY SMITH appear in CHAMPIONS, we're going to feel free to do that because they operate in the same type of world. It's not going to stretch the boundaries of anyone's of credulity to find a CHAMPIONS character somewhere along the line in an ETERNITY SMITH story, or vice versa.

LOU: *But you haven't yet made the statement in your books that —*

DENNIS: I will make the statement *now:* ETERNITY SMITH and CHAMPIONS and CAPTAIN THUNDER AND BLUE BOLT as a general rule do *not* operate in the same world. But there are still likely to be occasional crossovers. In fact, there's one going on right now. Flare's sister, SPARKPLUG, is currently appearing in CAPTAIN THUNDER AND BLUE BOLT.

LOU: *There's a Champion Sparkplug? Ouch.* (Laughter.)

DENNIS: Congratulations. You're only the second person to see the joke. Anyway, we've planned this crossover from the beginning. As soon as we'd determined that Blue Bolt would be young, blue-eyed, blond, very male, and probably sexually active, we thought it would be a good idea to get him together with Flare's electrically powered sister, who was young, blue-eyed, blonde, very female, and *probably* interested in the same sorts of things that Flare is interested in. It was a coldly mercenary decision. *(Laughter)* We wanted to encourage CHAMPIONS readers to pick up a few issues of CAPTAIN THUNDER, and maybe encourage CAPTAIN THUNDER readers to go buy CHAMPIONS so they could see more of Sparkplug.

BUT ANY PREFERENCES AREN'T IMPORTANT. WHAT'S IMPORTANT IS THAT YOU SEPARATE YOURSELF FROM YOUR SISTER AND ESTABLISH YOUR OWN IDENTITY FOR THAT, WE... HAVE TO THINK OF A GOOD NAME!
BUT I LIKE THE NAME FLARE! I DON'T WANT TO CHANGE IT.
WAIT! WE'RE TALKING ABOUT A SUPERHERO NAME. A NAME YOU CAN USE WITHOUT TELLING PEOPLE YOUR REAL ONE. SO YOU SEE...
LIKE TERESA CALLS HERSELF FLARE?
I'M TOLD THAT SOME OF THESE POSSIBILITIES ARE ALREADY BEING USED IN COMIC BOOKS, BUT COMIC BOOK SUPERHERO TERMS AREN'T REAL. SO IF YOU LIKE ONE OF THOSE, I DON'T SEE ANY REASON YOU CAN'T USE IT.
I'M RATHER PARTIAL TO THIS LAST ONE, ACTUALLY.
Lightning Lass
Lightning Girl
Lightning Woman
Lady Lightning
Lady Thunder
Sparkster
Sparkplate
Electra!
Thunderbolt
Amplifier
Hitwatch
Dynamo
Dynamo Girl
WELL... I DON'T LIKE ANY OF THEM.
PERHAPS WE'RE GOING ABOUT THIS THE WRONG WAY. TELL ME WHAT YOU DID LIKE.
I LIKE RADIOGIRL! I COULD CALL MYSELF RONNETTA!
THAT'S A VERY NICE NAME, I SUPPOSE, BUT IT'S NOT REALLY VERY APPROPRIATE, IS IT?

Olga, the racist heroine, searches for a supername. An example of Hero Comics' subtle tongue-in-cheek scripting style.

LOU: *That's called commercial in the industry.*

DENNIS: Yeah. But if the *stories* hadn't worked, we wouldn't have done it. We're not interested *only* in cross commercialism. Still, the bottom line is if you don't get enough money coming in then you can't continue to do things you want to do. The way we're handling it is that there are elements common to all of the strips. In CHAMPIONS, there's a government agency that provides intelligence services. In ETERNITY SMITH, Skylark works as a free agent for the Federal Intelligence Services Team. In CAPTAIN THUNDER, a different organization, the National Intelligent Bureau, has been trying to get Captain Thunder and Blue Bolt to work for them. We figure that the N.I.B. provides information to F.I.S.T., which passes it along to the Champions on a need-to-know basis. The Champions would get information about Captain Thunder and Blue Bolt, and when Olga sees the information about Blue Bolt, she's going

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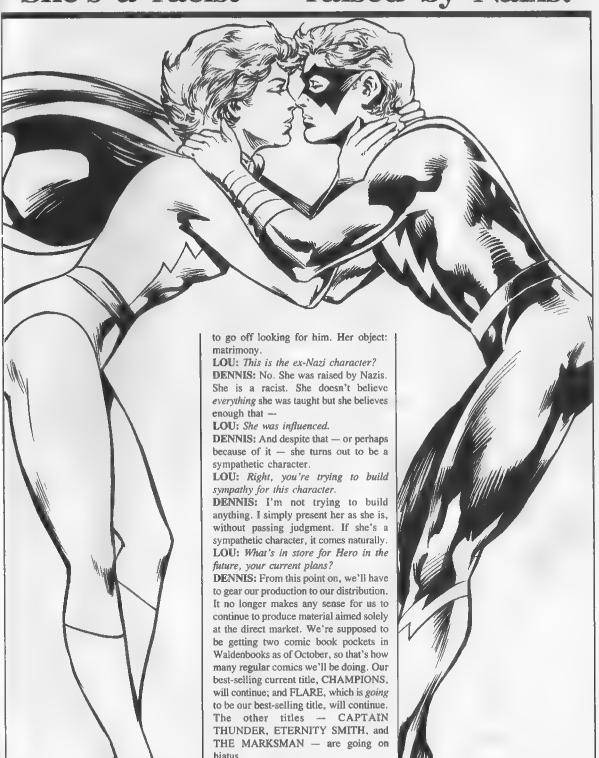
"She's a racist — raised by Nazis."



to go off looking for him. Her object: matrimony.

LOU: *This is the ex-Nazi character?*

DENNIS: No. She was raised by Nazis. She is a racist. She doesn't believe *everything* she was taught but she believes enough that —

LOU: *She was influenced.*

DENNIS: And despite that — or perhaps because of it — she turns out to be a sympathetic character.

LOU: *Right, you're trying to build sympathy for this character.*

DENNIS: I'm not trying to build anything. I simply present her as she is, without passing judgment. If she's a sympathetic character, it comes naturally.

LOU: *What's in store for Hero in the future, your current plans?*

DENNIS: From this point on, we'll have to gear our production to our distribution. It no longer makes any sense for us to continue to produce material aimed solely at the direct market. We're supposed to be getting two comic book pockets in Waldenbooks as of October, so that's how many regular comics we'll be doing. Our best-selling current title, CHAMPIONS, will continue; and FLARE, which is *going* to be our best-selling title, will continue. The other titles — CAPTAIN THUNDER, ETERNITY SMITH, and THE MARKSMAN — are going on hiatus.

LOU: *You're cancelling one Champions spin-off in order to make room for another?*

DENNIS: We're putting some titles on hiatus until we're in a position to make it profitable to produce them. FANTASY

"Flare turned out to be absolute dynamite."

BOOK went on hiatus, but now that it's profitable to produce it, it's coming back. We figure on bringing the comics back in early 1989. But the fact that the *comics* are on hiatus doesn't mean that the *characters* won't be visible. The Marksman will still be in the Champions comic, and there will be collections of early ETERNITY SMITH and CAPTAIN THUNDER material released as graphic novels in October and November.

LOU: *So in the meantime, it's just CHAMPIONS and FLARE.*

DENNIS: Like I said earlier, we were wrong when we thought the Marksman would be the character best suited to a solo comic. You may remember the contest we ran in the early Hero Comics issues asking readers which character they wanted to see in a solo comic. We thought it was going to be the Marksman, so we started producing material based on that assumption. It turned out to be FLARE. She got *six times* as many votes as any of the other characters. So much for my judgment. And the readers were right. As a solo character, Flare turned out to be absolute dynamite! Action, adventure, and cheesecake! There's something about her that inspires. **Tim Burgard** and **Mark Beachum** are producing some *beautiful* artwork for the FLARE comic. And the stories are like nothing you would *ever* see from Marvel or DC. FLARE could turn out to be the book that defines what a Hero Comics title is supposed to be.

LOU: *You've mentioned Mark Beachum. Anybody else who hasn't been working for you soon, or that you've approached?*

DENNIS: Well, after we lose **Chris Marrinan** to Wonder Woman, **Howard Simpson** is going to be taking over as the regular penciler on CHAMPIONS. Also, **Valentino** is working on an ICESTAR solo story. The ideal perception of Hero Comics . . . *(Pause.)* The thing we *want* to establish with Hero Comics is that it's a company of quality where people who *know* how to produce good quality books can go to produce them. That's the whole thing in a nutshell.

LOU: *So basically what we are going to be seeing from Hero is more heroic fiction?*

DENNIS: You're going to be seeing heroic fiction. Heroes are a viable archetype. That doesn't have to mean superheroes; normal people can be heroes in their own right.

LOU: *Would you have any concepts for a book along that line?*

DENNIS: We might, but not yet. As I said, we're limited right now by the distribution that's available to us.

LOU: *Do you have any closing statement you'd like to make?*

DENNIS: Yes. Over the course of the last year, HERO COMICS has been producing some *excellent* graphic story material that has, unfortunately, been largely overlooked. I hope people will begin *noticing* what we're doing, because the material we're producing is mature, literate, entertaining, and thoroughly professional. Creatively, we think we're about to hit our stride. For us, FANTASY BOOK and FLARE, in particular, represent a new plateau of graphic storytelling, and I hope comic-book readers will start thinking about *buying* some of the Hero Comics titles. We realize that not every Hero Comics title will appeal to every reader, but whether you like the heroic motif in general, or team books, or science fiction, or cheesecake, or espionage, or sword and sorcery, or the occult, you should be able to find a Hero comic that you like. *Read* the books. These are damn good comics.

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LAST WORD

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SECRETS OF CREATING ADULT COMIC STORES

Dear CI Folks,

As a retailer trying to make inroads into the mainstream adult market, **Robert Jacobsen** ("Last Word," CI #60) has my sympathy. It's a tough road to hoe. And he's right on target when he dismisses the various "upscale" super-hero titles as worthless in this context.

I do think, however, that **Jacobsen** is overly hasty in eliminating certain specific titles and trends from consideration. Sloughing off LOVE AND ROCKETS as "hip-punk-radicalism," and therefore inaccessible to a maintream audience, is at the very least accurate. Certainly **Gilbert Hernandez**'s two solo books, HEARTBREAK SOUP and THE RETICENT HEART, are mainstream in the very *best* sense of the word — that is, something that can be read by a normal, intelligent human being. (Bear in mind that PUBLISHER'S WEEKLY, hardly a hip-punk-radical journal, embraced both Jaime and Gilbert's work warmly.) And even USAGI YOJIMBO seems to attract an astonishingly wide audience — a rave review, and I'm told the NEWSWEEK reporter who worked on that magazine's story a year back was most taken by it (although it didn't show up in the final story, to my regret.)

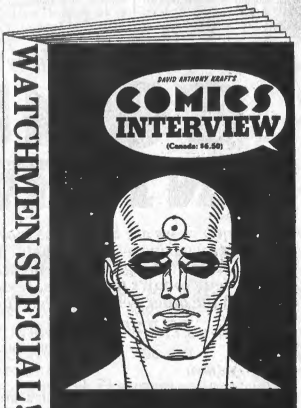
But this is both quibbling and self-promotion, and does not address **Jacobsen**'s main point: namely, that there are very few comic books out there that are accessible to "normal" adults.

I think **Jacobsen's** main fumble occurs when he dismisses graphic novels and "special editions." Although a smart guy in all other respects, **Jacobsen** is simply still stuck in that serial mentality that has screwed up comics since Day One (and hasn't done wonders for television, either). If we posit that there's a substantial number of graphic novels that fit his criteria for adult acceptability (and I'll get to that in a moment) — why on Earth do we need "regularly published comics" to buttress them? That's like saying that in order to get people to go see the movies, someone's got to put out a new JAMES BOND or RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK episode every month— otherwise the people following these series will grow bored and disenchanted.

There are not a *lot* of adult graphic . . . let's call them "graphic albums," okay? . . . graphic albums out there. But if **Jacobsen** wants to go through his Diamond or Capital catalogue and backstock a few copies of every reasonably adult, mainstream-accessible graphic album, he's going to have one hell of an order.

Let's see, now. First, he might as well order all the various comic-strip reprint books out, since we know adults do read the strips. That's seven POPEYE volumes, several LI'L ABNERs, some PRINCE VALIANTS, a couple LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIEs, lots of TERRY AND THE PIRATES, some CAPTAIN EASY, a KRAZY KAT or two, some **McCay** stuff . . . hell, you can probably get 40 or 50 books right there!

Then let's go shopping at Catalan. Although they don't put out a lot of books, they've been scrupulous about keeping them all in print, and just about all of 'em are something that can be read by your average non-fan adult — all right, there's a couple of near-porno erotic collections, but hell, those might sell even better than



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WATCHMEN SPECIAL! Alan Moore and others on what many consider the greatest comics masterpiece of all time. Need we say more?

the others. Count another 40 or so here.

Okay, now we're cooking. RAW books — they've got a half-dozen books out, mostly under the Pantheon imprint. Hey, Pantheon also does LIFE IN HELL — there go another four. Let's stock the **Lynda Barry** collections, too. And how about the occasional oddball book from a mainstream publisher trying his luck — **Claire Bretecher**'s FRUSTRATION, or TALES OF EAST TEXAS? AMERICAN SPLENDOR! Another 25 at least!

Okay, what's Fantagraphics got? **R. Crumb** is actually getting to the point where he's known to non-comics afficionados; that's three books, and counting. NEW YORK, NEW YORK; EDGE; the **Friedman Bros.**; certainly BEST OF NEAT STUFF shouldn't scare off any generation weaned on MAD. Then there's LOS TEJANOS and JOURNEY, and those seven or eight LOVE AND ROCKETS collections — hey, that's another 20.

Kitchen Sink's got a bunch of terrific books, too. We've already mentioned the strip reprinted stuff, but how about the **Eisner** books? And let's throw OMAHA on the stack anyway. And of course THE JUNGLE BOOK and GOODMAN BEAVER — those were mainstream to *begin* with. Another ten.

NBM! They've got their seven swell **Hugo Pratt** books — as accessible as **Jack London** — and SILENT INVASIONS brings up their total to 10.

Okay, how about the *transcendent* kids' comics — those things written drawn for children decades ago, that are now finding a new audience? Certainly at least half of the EC reprints — heck, *all* of them. (Let's not forget **Stephen King** is the most successful author of the decade.) **Carl Barks** collections. And, moving over to the foreign section, TINTIN. And ASTERIX, for that matter — those books are genuinely adult satire. (And let's not forget ASTERIX was actually run as a syndicated strip in the late '70 s. It bombed, but it was there.)

Is the fantasy in the Marvel's MOEBIUS and INCAL albums really so far beyond what adults flock to buy in books at Walden's, or to watch at the local Cineplex? How about DC's science fiction adaptations? (Okay, so they were lousy, but that's not the point here.) THE RETURN OF MISTER X?

All right then . . . just a few minutes searching our memories, and we've come up with several hundred books, none of which would seem out of place in an "adult, mainstream" comic book store.

See, I'm convinced the secret to creating an adult comic book store is to order all of the above . . . to keep them in stock *constantly*, in the same way that your local Walden's keeps their **Gore Vidals** and **John D. MacDonalds** and **Dave Barrys** and what-have-yous in stock . . . to hide way, de-emphasize, or, if you're really feeling feisty, plain and simple *not stock* the Batman-with-tits and Green-Arrow-with-real-blood nonsense . . . to avoid putting giant fucking robots and posters of **Traci Lords** in your window display . . . and act like you're running a *book* store, for God's sake, instead of a modified bubblegum-card shoppe with a comics rack.

I think **Robert Jacobsen** is on the right track. Fifty storeowners like him, and we'll leave the "Comics 'R' Us" brontosaurs, with their stacks of X-MEN back issues and piles of Bat-Memorabilia, in the dust. I'm convinced of that.

Who wants to go first?

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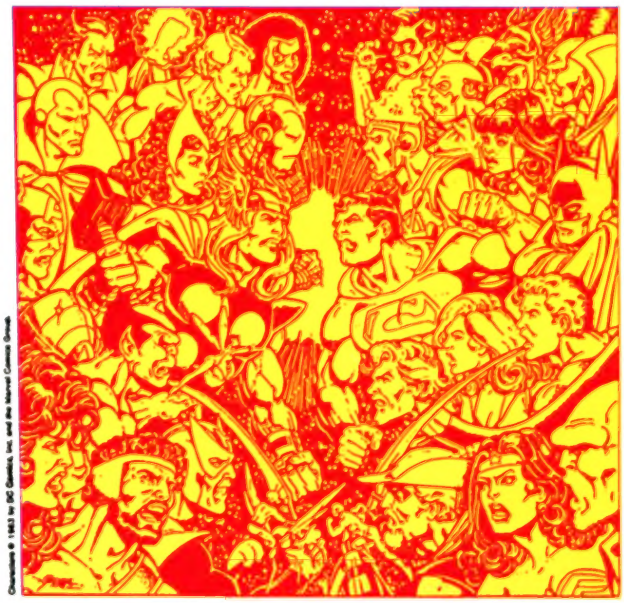

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